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Building for a new global era

THE Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) has been described as one of the boldest projects around; over-ambitious even. But when the world's most powerful information technology (IT) minds decide that there is reason to sit down together and chart the progress of a project like the MSC, it suggests that there must be quite a bit of potential there that nobody should or could ignore. When these IT generals speak their minds and said they are quite impressed by what they have seen, then there must be more than just a bit of promise.

Take their word for it. The members of the International Advisory Panel (IAP) of the MSC, who held their second meeting in Cyberjaya yesterday after the inaugural California gathering last year, said they are confident, optimistic, bullish, impressed, encouraged and inspired, among other things. BCE Inc chief executive officer Lynton Wilson, while noting that it is difficult to predict the future of any high-technology venture, said he is impressed by steps taken by the MSC representatives and has full confidence in their ability to implement the project. Motorola Corp chairman Gary Tooker said his company, which has been investing in Malaysia for a quarter of a century, sees the MSC as important not only for this country but also as a project that is likely to affect how the industry worldwide moves forward. Siemens AG vice president Axel Hass said he sees a big accomplishment in the progress of the MSC compared with a year ago. Hass finds that there is a very clear segmentation of what should be done, with the various projects under the MSC having been very well defined.

What is clear is that despite the horrifying ride the economy has been taking, the promise and prospects of the MSC are not jeopardised. None of the IAP members or the companies they represent have been forced to reconsider or review their plans to invest in the Corridor, and they are not advising anyone to do so. The thumbs-up from the industry leaders should be seen as a signal for those who have not made up their mind that the Malaysian project is going full speed ahead. The Government has said that the MSC is a top-priority project that will not be affected by its expenditure cut, which has seen many major infrastructure projects being deferred.

The fact that only slightly more than half of the 44-strong IAP was represented at the meeting (25 in all: 13 members attended and 12 others sent their representatives) is not a factor that should overly concern prospective investors or excite detractors of the MSC. Already, 103 companies have been accorded MSC status, with 80 having started operations. The Government and the local private sector are committed to spend at least RM25 billion under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) on IT and related activities. The support shown by the Government, especially by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, reflects Malaysia's seriousness in making the MSC another Malaysian success story.

With MSC, Malaysia is not only talking about providing incentives to woo the investment dollar from top IT companies worldwide, but also creating a conducive environment for them to research and develop products for the next millennium. The Corridor is not just an industrial zone; it is a 750 sq km multimedia products and services hub where the world's IT rivals and allies will operate and, like in the Silicon Valley, where their development is protected by the Malaysian Government. The MSC is also not

just a place to work and make money, but also the zone to develop the expertise for the future. Multimedia universities will bring together some of the best IT intellects to ensure that Malaysia and the companies operating at the MSC will have a constant supply of experts and manpower.

But with all the promises and prospects, the MSC will still need the necessary support of Malaysians themselves. Their willingness and ability to grasp this new field and meet the future challenges of IT will determine whether Malaysians will end up benefiting, as they should, from the MSC. True, as Dr Mahathir once said, we are not building the MSC for ourselves but for a new global era. But if Malaysians share none of the vision of the MSC or the confidence of the IAP members, the MSC might still develop into an international hub but benefit only the global investors and businessmen and not the ordinary Malaysian.

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