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Drawing in more European firms into the MSC

Kamarul Yunus in Hanover

HANOVER (Germany), Sun: With 7,250 exhibitors and a net display space of 371,003 sq m, the Hanover's CeBIT '98 is no doubt the world's leading showplace for office automation, information technology (IT) and telecommunications.

And what was more significant about CeBIT '98 was the presence of several Malaysian IT and multimedia companies at the world's largest computer trade fair held here from March 19 to 25.

Never mind if they are not familiar names among IT and computer enthusiasts in this part of the world, but at least they tried their best to participate and promote their products during the show.

What was more aspiring about CeBIT '98 was the presence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was on a three-day working visit to Germany since Wednesday.

His visit was primarily aimed at promoting Malaysia's ambitious Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project to the Europeans, especially the German IT and multimedia companies, not necessarily the big players but also the small- and medium-scale entrepreneurs.

"The big German companies like Siemens are already aware and have come in (to participate in the MSC). But it is the medium and small companies which we would like to draw in.

"In business, people may operate from the garage but we never know where they are going and how big they are going to be in the next 10 years. Microsoft is one example.

"We cannot afford to ignore everyone," Dr Mahathir had said, adding that Siemens is one of the German companies which is already participating in the development of the MSC, a 15km by 50m designated area for IT and multimedia development.

Speaking at a dialogue as part of the MSC road show during the CeBIT '98 fair on Thursday, Dr Mahathir had said that response from the Europeans, including German companies, is still considered low.

Based on the percentage of companies applying for the MSC status since April last year, only 12 per cent out of 180 applicants are from Europe.

Looking at CeBIT '98, Dr Mahathir said it is obvious that Malaysia would not be doing a good job if it failed to persuade European companies to participate in the MSC.

"We think that there is great scope for more European participation in the MSC, especially the medium and small IT and computer companies," he had said.

Prior to the road show, the Prime Minister was also asked about the MSC in a dialogue with German businessmen.

He was asked whether the project was affected by the present currency and stock market problems faced by Malaysia and countries in the South-East Asian region.

Dr Mahathir reiterated that the project is not affected by the economic downturn and is progressing well. In fact, the implementation of the MSC is one year ahead of schedule.

Based on the numerous questions fielded by participants of both dialogues, it seems that the Germans are interested and would not want to be left behind in the development of the MSC.

A participant at the road show wanted to know the outcome of Dr Mahathir's meeting with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and businessmen and

whether more German companies will be participating in the project.

Another participant had argued that the Americans and Japanese seem to have dominated the MSC project.

On this, Dr Mahathir replied that the Americans and the Japanese got to know about the project earlier than the Europeans, but stressed that European companies, including German's small and medium entrepreneurs are welcome to invest in the MSC.

The fact that the MSC road show was held at the CeBIT '98 fairground proved Malaysia's commitment to draw in more European IT and computer players to the MSC.

In addition, CeBIT '98 also served as a platform for Malaysia to promote its own computer and telecommunications show scheduled for October this year.

Malaysia's premier trade fair in the fields of IT, multimedia and telecommunications (MIT '98) is scheduled to be held at the Mines exhibition centre in Kuala Lumpur from October 6 to 10.

The MIT '98 is jointly organised by Hannover Fairs Asia Pte Ltd and a Malaysian company, Interasia Fairs and Exhibitions Sdn Bhd.

At the press conference held at the end of his visit, Dr Mahathir had also hinted at the possibility of Malaysia organising a bigger computer and telecommunications exhibition, almost as big as CeBIT '98.

Noting that there are currently two exhibitions related to the IT and telecommunications held in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said the country will be able to organise a bigger exhibition if these two shows are incorporated into one.

CeBIT '98 itself started as part of the world's biggest trade fair in Hanover.

The computer segment of the Hanover Fair was separated from the main event in 1996 because of increasing participation from IT and telecommunication players in the show.

Taking this as an example, there should be no reason why Malaysia will not to be able to organise such an exhibition in a bigger way.

Malaysia had, after all, been able to organise several major international events successfully.

One such example is the biennial Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace or Lima exhibition, which had grown since its inception in 1991.

It is hoped that MIT '98 will achieve the same success as the Lima shows and will catapult Malaysia into the forefront of the IT and multimedia industries.

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