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New Ministry a boost to ICT

DESPITE some scepticism over the Multimedia Super Corridor when it was first launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad some two years ago, indications are that it is all systems go. The announcement of a new Ministry for Multimedia effective today reinforces the country's commitment to the belief that the multimedia industry is a prime mover in the future expansion of the global economy.

The information revolution and convergence of information and communication technology have unleashed the forces of globalisation, accelerating the processes and augmenting the effects. This phenomenon brings both challenges and opportunities. The new Ministry appropriately takes charge of these two important areas and, inter alia, will chart the industry's long-term strategy. It is expected to look into the implications and impact of ICT in all aspects of life. It was only recently that Malaysia stressed that societies all over the world should know how to collectively harness the power of ICT to promote human dignity and socio-economic justice. It also advocated that now is the right time for the international community to begin formulating a new global framework for information age governance and the nurturing of a global civilised society. In the light of these pronouncements and the fast-growing industry, the new Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, as the single regulatory authority for the converged industry of telecommunications, broadcasting and computing, will no doubt have a challenging task ahead.

The MSC is Malaysia's beachhead into the Information Technology-dominated 21st Century. The economic slowdown has raised some fears that the project may be affected but these have been speedily dismissed by the authorities. The Multimedia Development Corporation has made it clear that there are no inherent contradictions between the MSC policies and the Government's recent efforts to stabilise the economy.

It should be borne in mind that it is precisely IT's increasing importance to global economies, including Malaysia, that propelled investments in the MSC. It will be the country's second engine of growth. Thus, despite the economic difficulties the country faces, the project has been categorised as a productive sector and will be pursued vigorously. The recent taking over of a 55 per cent stake in Cyberview Sdn Bhd, the developer of Cyberjaya, is also a testimony to the Government's intention to ensure the success of the project. It is entrusted with building a 2,800ha flagship zone, phase one of which focuses on providing a conducive working environment for IT/multimedia industries and commercial requirements.

The vision of the MSC through year 2020 is divided into three phases. The first one is critical as it involves the successful creation of the MSC, involving the setting up of 50 world-class companies, seven flagship applications and a world-leading framework of cyberlaws.

Evidently, the authorities are well aware of the challenges ahead. A big challenge is IT manpower and expertise, a worldwide concern. It is estimated that MSC companies require some 17,000 knowledge workers over the next five years. The industry requires a critical mass of IT experts to generate momentum and sustain growth.

Another vital factor in pursuing the MSC is involvement of the people. The National IT Council's new panel for 1999-2001 announced in September

reflects the social agenda aspect and a right step to bring the MSC to the local level. The line-up of representatives from a cross-section of society, especially from the media, women, consumers and environmental groups, should provide a meaningful interaction for balanced discussion and formulation of programmes.

Indisputably, the MSC is a far-sighted decision and a new source of economic growth for the country. Only with unwavering commitment and support of all could this marathon project, which has caught the imagination of the world, excel.

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