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Year-Enders IT

1997 GROWTH YEAR FOR IT DESPITE ECONOMIC WOES

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KUALA LUMPUR: The year 1997 has been one of rapid growth in information technology in Malaysia -- both in IT awareness campaigns and IT projects namely the Multimedia Super Corridor that has thrived despite economic setbacks in the second half of the year.

The Multimedia Development Corporation, which is in charge of the MSC project, announced that 93 companies had been granted their MSC status, securing more than RM95 billion (US\$25 billion) in investments.

This figure was up almost 100 percent of the number of MSC status companies announced in the middle of the year -- just before the ringgit and share prices took a turn for the worse.

Some 173 applications for the status are still being processed while more applications continue to pour in.

In fact, the Multimedia Development Corporation has stated that 12 to 20 of the companies would begin operations in Cyberjaya, the intelligent city located in the MSC, in February -- a year ahead of schedule.

The MSC is a 15 km by 40 km area encompassing Kuala Lumpur City Centre, Putrajaya and the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport which will together act as major consumers of multimedia products and services. Within the area a multimedia catalyst centre will be established and world-class multimedia corporations will be invited to locate their business units and R & D facilities there.

Much of the encouraging response of investors in the MSC could be attributed the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who has been promoting the MSC tirelessly.

Dr Mahathir, who is chairman of the National IT Council, was in the United States and Japan last January where he met leaders in the IT, multimedia and entertainment industries and briefed them about the MSC project.

In California, he chaired the first meeting of the International Advisory Panel (IAP) where for the first time ever some 25 leaders of rival IT companies sat together to discuss investment.

Among those at the meeting was world reknown IT consultant Kenichi Ohmae, Ambassador Diana Lady Dougan of the US, Larry Ellison of Oracle, James Barksdale of Netscape and Scott McNealy of Sun Microsystems.

Microsoft president Bill Gates who is also a member of the IAP was not able to attend though.

The prime minister had made the MSC one of the main topic of bilateral discussions in all of his extensive working trips to Europe, West Asia and South America beginning in May during what was supposed to be his two-month holiday.

Looking in perspective the initiative to move from an industrial manufacturing to an IT oriented economy as stated in the National IT Agenda is indeed worthwhile and a well-thought of policy.

The National Technology Council had recognised that while there are still quarters who could not grasp the idea of the long term proactive vision of the IT agenda, the key policy makers and players in the global industry are taking heed.

Putrajaya, the intelligent administrative capital where the Prime Minister's office is scheduled to move in by mid 1998, was also launched this year.

The legal framework of the MSC was put in place with the passing of

four cyberlaws earlier this year.

The cyberlaws were the Computer Crime Act, the Copyrights (Amendment) Act, the Digital Signature Act and Telemedicine Act.

The fifth cyberbill, the Multimedia Convergence bill, designed as a legal framework for the convergence of functions of broadcasting and telecommunications in the IT industry, was deferred from being tabled in the last session of parliament.

Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Minister Datuk Leo Moggie had announced in parliament that the tabling of the bill was deferred so that more time could be given to the legislature to study the bill as well as to debate it at the next parliamentary session.

In terms of IT education, the information ministry had launched an IT Awareness Campaign aimed at among others to develop a strong public interest and understanding of IT.

The campaign, launched by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir, also hopes to diminish phobias against IT in all sectors of society.

IT-related conferences, seminars and exhibitions also flourished during the year, attracting more and more common folks as opposed to only IT professionals in the past.

The biggest IT conference and exhibition, Inet 97, was hosted by the Internet Society and Multimedia Asia '97,

With a lot of resources at all levels garnered towards realising the national IT agenda, it looks like IT in Malaysia is all geared up for another productive year in 1998. -- BERNAMA

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