

PM lauds borderless world

But warns of debilitating effect

By LESLIE LAU

23 SEP 1999

KUALA LUMPUR: The Prime Minister said yesterday Malaysia welcomed the idea of a borderless world in the information age but also warned of its possible debilitating effects on governments.

"You can access the Internet from anywhere, but goods and services still have to cross borders," said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Answering questions at a one-and-a-half hour dialogue with participants at the Multimedia Asia 99 conference and exhibition here, he said "(a borderless world) can be very debilitating if governments can't collect taxes."

"We are up against the WTO (World Trade Organisation) now who want goods to cross borders freely," he said.

To another question, Dr Mahathir brushed aside concerns that the government was not flexible enough in amending laws and restrictions that could put off potential investors in the Multimedia Super Corridor.

He said Tuesday's an-

ouncement of a flat 10% levy on repatriation of profits on equity investments was an instance where the government had responded to the need for change.

"In the MSC we guarantee that information won't be restricted, there will be no censorship on the Internet.

"But if you download pornographic material and distribute it outside the MSC, then we have laws (against it)," he said.

Dr Mahathir also told participants that Malaysia would remain business-friendly and was willing to listen to the views of the private sector.

He quipped that there would be "rhetorical statements made by irresponsible politicians like myself," but he felt that businessmen were "hardheaded and interested in whether a country is stable."

"They (businessmen) want to know whether we will make 180 degree turns, or whether the Islamic party will rule, and we have to throw out all TV sets because they are instruments of Satan," he said.

Asked by another participant what his new vision

for the country was after the MSC, the Prime Minister said his new vision was to see Malaysia as an agriculture country.

He said the "biggest bill" for the country now was the import of food and as such he wanted to see the country become a major food producer.

"When we have land we only think of rubber and oil palm but there is far less returns (in these commodities) than in planting vegetables and even rearing chickens," he said.

He said the country was not maximising land usage and this had affected its trade balance.

The Prime Minister was also asked by two disabled participants about the accessibility of the information age to the disabled.

"I think the country is changing and have become much more concerned with the needs of the disabled," he said.

Dr Mahathir said information technology could help the disabled overcome their limitations because "with just one telephone you can do work on the other side of the world."