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## Dawning of a new telecoms era

TOMORROW is supposed to be quite a big day for the telecommunications sector, despite the absence of fanfare. Tomorrow is the day when Malaysia will take yet another step forward in this technology-laden industry, with the countrywide launch of equal access. Malaysian telecommunications subscribers will be granted the right to choose alternative trunk and long distance carriers. Today, only telecommunications consumers in the most liberalised economies can claim to have such freedom of choice. This latest progress once again underscores just how far the nation has come from the days when Telekom Malaysia Bhd was an overweight Government agency and an expenditure-guzzling monopoly. Although Telekom's privatization took place only slightly more than a decade ago, the achievements made thus far in the telecommunications sector are a cause for amazement. Since 1986, the country has encouraged the establishment of a healthy number of private sector players, including Celcom, Binariang, Mobikom, Sapura, Time Telecom and Mutiara. During this period, Malaysia had also sent its first satellite into orbit, putting it in a strategic position to unleash a new era of digital telecommunications and broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region and the world. The vision of the future does not stop there. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has ensured that the next generation of Malaysians will continue the great pursuit, using the Multimedia Super Corridor as their platform to take on the world of information technology and communications. The country has set very specific targets as far as telecommunications is concerned. By the year 2020, it wants a telephone penetration of 45 lines per 100 inhabitants, which is the standard in industrialised countries. This will require hefty investments by the industry, especially to wire up the most far-flung rural areas which guarantee to be unprofitable for many years to come. On their part, the companies created after the corporatisation of Telekom Malaysia have caught the imagination of the consumers, turning the sector into one of the most competitive in the country. They have invested billions and made billions in return. A whole new culture has started and the likes of Celcom and Sapura have shown how technologically-adept Malaysians can be. One outstanding factor in the telecommunications industry is the fact that the technology transfer has been real. Foreign investors who have been invited to take up as much as a 60 per cent stake in local telecommunication companies know what's in store and what kind of commitments they may have to make. But certainly, despite the economic downturn and the regional crises, this is one sector that has been more alive than ever and promises to be even more so in the coming years - in the MSC era - when Malaysia starts sending micro satellites into orbit and every household is wired up. Tomorrow's launch of equal access will serve up to the consumer elements like the Universal Service Obligation and the Framework on International Services. But herein lies the problem. Because the two official documents necessary to get equal access off the ground were delayed for nearly two months, the date January 1, 1999 - which was when equal access was supposed to have taken place in Malaysia - came and went. Now we've been told that none of the companies involved in making equal access a success are ready for the new service, even though Telekom has signed interconnectivity agreements with Binariang, DiGi Telecommunications and

Celcom. Some experts are saying that Malaysia might not see equal access for another month or so.

Which is not a big deal, really, if one considers that Malaysia has waited ages to be where it is today. The country would not be here at all if the Government had not been bold enough to break the monopoly in the telecommunications sector. But therein is a sign of complacency, of taking deadlines for granted. This isn't the first time; the Malaysian telecommunications sector is notorious for breaking its word. In an environment where the Government is trying to restore confidence and spruce up the image of the country, such an attitude does not help and therefore, should be discarded.

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