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Powering ahead with IT

SCEPTICISM and efforts by detractors to put a damper on Malaysia's effort to develop the Multimedia Super Corridor notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the country is powering ahead with its information technology programme. This month is indeed momentous for the development of the MSC and the launch of its RM2.2b nucleus city, Cyberjaya, and the Multimedia University next week will be milestones.

That the MSC has so far attracted 32 of the 50 world-class high-technology companies targeted by 2003 is significant for it contributes to the critical first phase of successful creation of the MSC. The opening of the country's first "smart labs" in two rural schools in Dengkil this week as a pioneering effort to test the efficacy of the Smart School concept is aptly timed and sited. Located on the periphery of the MSC, it is a prototype of private sector and community involvement in the implementation of the MSC's flagship applications. People's participation augurs well for the success of the MSC. While Malaysia is justifiably proud that it has made a big step forward in taking to IT, much remains to be done in terms of promoting the people's participation and human resource development.

It cannot be over emphasised that the nation's quantum leap into the Information Technology Age will not succeed unless all Malaysians embrace the technology and reap maximum benefits from it in the next millennium. The whole idea of IT, as one expert points out, is for a "people development programme" to improve the quality of life and provide the country with a second engine of growth. Understanding what is happening in the global technology, appreciating it and then implementing and reflecting it in life is the key to benefiting from IT. It is important, therefore, to recap the vital message from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, prime mover of the MSC, to Malaysians that with "our future at stake, we cannot afford to be a mere spectator of the information revolution". To do so would of course be at our own peril. We would be swept aside by this great tidal wave.

Especially in these economically challenging times, when the emphasis is productivity and efficiency, all the more Malaysians should respond to the call to support the nation's initiative in harnessing IT. The MSC is a tangible plan to test the multimedia technology in a designated area and the National IT Agenda a programme to transform the country in five thrust areas, namely electronic economy, electronic community, electronic public services, electronic learning and electronic sovereignty. It is imperative, as repeatedly emphasised by policy makers and industry players, that the Government-led IT initiatives be followed through at all levels. State Governments, corporations, academic institutions and the man in the street must integrate IT into every aspect of their activities.

It is heartening to hear from our young Netizens that while they see Internet usage nationwide is still low, the trend in the urban areas is encouraging. The proliferation of cybercafes, an important venue to promote IT usage, should be constructively supported. Parental guidance is crucial. The free access to information through the Net is often described as a tool of democratisation but with the urban-rural gap, it is feared that IT-development in the country is elitist. The Government is addressing this concern.

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