

# Malaysia takes first step to becoming entertainment hub

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MALAYSIA marked its weekend debut in the movie business with dancers, drummers and dreams of becoming a world player in the entertainment industry.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad inaugurated Entertainment Village (E-Village), shaped after Universal Studios in the US and aimed at making Malaysia the hub of the booming Asian film industry.

The entire project, expected to be completed by 2007, will cost some RM3 billion. It is located in Dengkil in the Multimedia Super Corridor.

The village, on a 485ha site which was once a tin mine and plantation area, will eventually include eight studios, an academy of dramatic arts, theme parks, a hotel, residential areas and health farms.

"E-Village is today a reality and we will pursue this till we can stand alongside others in the entertainment industry professionally and globally," said Dr Mahathir.

He tore a giant movie ticket late Friday to launch the virtual studio and sound stage, part of the first phase. Hong Kong movie star Jackie Chan was among the guests.

"Out of this E-Village project we will witness a growth of opportunities, both social and economic, the transforming of society and the building of new creative skills and professions," Dr Mahathir said.

The project was given a head start last week following the participation of India-based Pentamedia Graphics Ltd, the world's third largest player in computer animation.

Pentamedia and E-Village will jointly set up a multimedia technology centre to provide training and produce and distribute movies and tele-serials, officials said.

Entertainment Village (M) Sdn Bhd chief executive officer and director Ibrahim Abdul Ghaffar said four

other production companies from Europe had expressed interest in the studio.

"We are not comparing ourself to Hollywood or Bollywood," he said.

"We are not looking at the big players, the US\$100 million (US\$1 = RM3.80) movies like Titanic. We are looking at the slightly lower end, around US\$30-40 million. For us, it's big enough."

Ibrahim said Fox Studio's rental rates of around US\$3,360 daily will be the benchmark, but Malaysia's competitive currency will make it cheaper for foreign houses to shoot here.

The company is seeking foreign partners and is holding talks with Universal Studios about a possible alliance, he said without elaborating.

The company is currently 30 per cent co-owned by Mr Steven Griggs, a vice-president of British Aerospace (BAe), who is investing as an individual and not on behalf of BAe. Initial paid-up capital is RM1 million.

Mr Bob Bishop, chairman and chief executive of Silicon Graphics Inc, called the E-Village an "Asian variation" of Hollywood's success and said it would attract content creators worldwide.

But Mr Jeffrey Hardee, Motion Picture Association vice president, cited piracy as an issue that Malaysia must first address.

"There is a need for very strong enforcement of intellectual property laws to ensure that piracy is not pervasive. (Companies) need to feel confident that their work is protected," he said.

Mr James Ring, managing director of Australia-based Pollard Productions which acted as technical consultant, said the Malaysian studio has more features than Fox in Sydney.

This and lower overall cost are major incentives for foreign production houses, he said. — AFP