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Gates: MSC is awesome (HL)

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CYBERJAYA, Wed. - Microsoft Corporation chairman Bill Gates, who visited Cyberjaya for the first time today, said he was impressed by its size and the quality of work being carried out there.

He said he had often wondered how it would look like and "I think that it is even more impressive in terms of its size and quality of work that is being done here than I would have expected."

Describing the Multimedia Super Corridor as "awesome", he said it had brought together the Government's long-term commitment as well as investments from venture capitalists and knowledge from companies like Microsoft.

"I applaud this move," he said, adding that outside of the United States, there was no other information technology project to match the scale, commitment and energy of the MSC.

Gates, who is also Microsoft's chief software architect, was in Malaysia for a whirlwind visit. Having arrived in the wee hours, he kept to a tight schedule which utilised every minute until his departure at 5pm for India.

This is his third visit to Malaysia.

Gates also had an hour-long meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in which they discussed developments in the technology business and Multimedia Super Corridor.

"We talked about what's going on in the technology business and about Malaysia's opportunity to continue to participate in that," said Gates who is a member of the MSC's International Advisory Panel.

He did not attend last week's annual meeting but said his representative, Microsoft Asia Pacific president Pieter Knook, had sent him an eight-page e-mail report.

He said he agreed with the IAP input that Malaysia should focus on a few very strong software initiatives but added that it should not be the Government which chose the projects.

"You don't want the Government to essentially be picking it (the showcase applications), you want the marketplace to be picking it," he said at a Press conference.

He said Malaysian companies should focus on applications to meet local demands but to be world class, they also must be export-oriented.

Asked about MSC's competitiveness, he said many countries were trying to develop areas to locate a cluster of high-technology companies.

"Malaysia is actually quite ahead of many countries that are both larger and more economically developed," he said, citing France and Germany as nations which were closely monitoring Malaysia's initiatives.

Gates said he felt that the rise in demand meant that high-tech activities could be successful in many countries and it was not a "zero sum game where only one or two will be successful".

Asked about his failure to attend any IAP meeting since the panel was set up four years ago, Gates said he was proud to be a member but was sorry that the meetings could not fit into his schedule.

He said he did have an on-going dialogue with the Prime Minister and top people in the Multimedia Development Corporation, and spoke to Dr Mahathir over the telephone whenever the latter visited the United States.

"Certainly, my input has been solicited. I hope it has made a difference. I am really pleased to see the progress here.

"I do think that coming to visit Malaysia on a regular basis shows my

commitment, including the milestone we are celebrating today," he said, referring to the Microsoft Knowledge Capital Centre Sdn Bhd which he had launched earlier.

This resource centre providing services to software developers, vendors and Malaysian businesses, has year-round programmes including seminars.

Gates said the centre would provide information to companies and the Multimedia University, with which he had signed a memorandum of understanding for Microsoft to sponsor development programmes, valued at RM10 million over the next five years.

He said it was appropriate for Microsoft to forge a formal relationship with the university as the presence of a high-quality university was the key to driving start-up companies in an area.

He cited the example of the United States which had three technological hubs centred around universities - California, Seattle and Boston.

He also said Microsoft was committed to investing in Malaysia as the key to making an impact on companies here.

Progress could already be seen as its local partners including Sapura and MRCB Multimedia Consortium, had begun creating innovative products for the local and global market, he said.

On software piracy, he said there had been substantial improvement in Malaysia and a growing awareness that using licensed software was beneficial as well as being the proper thing to do.

Asked if software prices could be lowered to combat piracy, he said the prices were set by competition and in general, prices of both computers and software had come down dramatically over the years.

Commenting on free software, he said it would always have a role to play but for many types of software, there was a need for capitalistic incentive to develop it.

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