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PM: Prompt response to new technologies needed

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NEW technologies can increase the productivity of a country, thus rejecting or even delaying their adoption would reduce the competitiveness of the country's economy, says Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He said with e-commerce and knowledge-economy demanding faster communications and convergence of technologies, it is no longer practical for the Government to separate communications from broadcasting by issuing different licences for each service.

"One licence would cover all. Obviously, new technologies cannot be licensed separately from old technologies," he said when opening the 40th Commonwealth Telecommunications Council (CTO) meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

He said some people do not understand the technology and suspect that they are being taken for a ride.

"They feel that the Government must control and license telecommunications companies and limit their numbers. The investments involved are very big and it is likely that many would fail, with serious consequences for investors, employees and also the Government," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said some telecommunications companies dislike licensing "unless they have already been licensed and newcomers are excluded".

These companies may be stuck with expensive old technology which they plan to use and get returns on their investments, he added.

"New technologies, we are told, are cheaper and more efficient as well as lending to wider applications. Not to use them would make a country backward in terms of communications and business," he said.

This will encourage new companies to come up with proposals for the state-of-the-art applications which the old companies are not too keen to take up, which will also place the Government in a dilemma.

"To reject new technology will be bad, to accept, can cause a lot of losses for large old companies," he added.

The Prime Minister, however, said that the Government is not deterred and plans to make full use of the technology for the country's growth and development with the implementation of, among others, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), Multimedia University, Entertainment Village and Cyberjaya.

"All the necessary telecommunications and other infrastructure have been put in place. Everything that is needed for research, development, worldwide operational centres, have been provided," he added.

Total investment in the MSC is expected to exceed RM20 billion by 2005. In terms of employment, some 35,000 jobs will be created by 2005 compared with only 5,500 new jobs between 1997 and 1999.

"Technology should not be a privilege of those in the urban areas or in the rich countries only," he said.

On the roles of the CTO, Dr Mahathir said the council can help in narrowing the "digital divide" by committing funds, resources, and computer and Internet training to the less developed countries before they fall further behind in technology and wealth.

"All countries, big and small, have potential markets for telecommunications," he said, adding as independent nations, they can make available certain licences and facilities.

He also said while there is a rush to gain shares in the telecommunications industry worldwide by major international players, it is hoped that these companies will not try to monopolise everything.

"If they are needed to help the industry in poorer countries, they should apportion a bigger share of the profits to their partners," he said.

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