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PM: We have to succeed in Info Age

Abdul Razak Ahmad

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Government will push ahead to make Malaysia a success in the Information Age despite facing difficulties licensing the telecommunications sector, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Dr Mahathir outlined the two dilemmas which the Government had to deal with as a result of rapid advances in telecommunications technologies.

The first was that while existing licensees may be "stuck with expensive old technologies which they plan to use to get returns for on their investments", more companies are applying for licences to offer newer technologies.

"The Government will be faced with a dilemma. To reject new technology will be bad, to accept can cause a lot of losses for large old companies."

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the opening of the 40th Commonwealth Telecommunications Council (CTC) meeting at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel here.

Another problem facing the Government in terms of licensing was the rapid convergence within the telecommunications sector.

Dr Mahathir said it was no longer practical to provide separate licences for various services in the telecommunications industry, such as broadcasting, telephony, and internet transmission.

"The obvious answer is to have one licence for everything ... (but) still, the convergence game goes on."

Governments become hesitant to offer new licences due to these difficulties.

"The investments involved are very big and it is likely that many would fail, with serious consequences for investors, employees and also the Government."

Dr Mahathir, however, stressed that these new technologies must be embraced because failure to do so would jeopardise the country's competitiveness.

"With E-commerce and the K-economy demanding ever faster communication, the country cannot afford to delay or reject new technologies."

He also touched on some of the dangers which rapid advances in the telecommunications industry could bring.

"Maybe Mr Soros was selling a billion dollars (worth) of Malaysian Ringgit and causing the exchange rate to plunge ... just by talking on handphone," he quipped, to the laughter of all present.

On a more serious note, Dr Mahathir stressed that despite the potential hazards, Malaysia remained committed to embracing these new technologies.

"We are not deterred, of course. It is not the technology which is bad. It is the people who apply the technology who are bad."

Dr Mahathir added: "Malaysia intends to make full use of the technology for its growth and development."

He explained that the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) was launched, along with the Multimedia University, to train Malaysia's knowledge workers and to conduct research in new technologies.

"All the necessary telecommunication and other infrastructure have been put in place."

He called on all developing countries to fully exploit these new technologies, which he described as an "opportunity in a millennium" for many poor countries.

"Unlike the industrial age which initially involved only the already rich nations, the Information Age provides an opportunity for all countries to start together," he said, adding that all countries, regardless of size, had potential telecommunications markets.

As such, Dr Mahathir urged international telecommunications players not to monopolise opportunities, and for all to work to reduce the digital divide.

The five-day event is jointly organised by Telekom Malaysia and the Energy, Communications and Multimedia Ministry, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO)

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