

PM: Present a united front

Be active in closing the digital divide, G-15 nations urged

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By MAZWIN NIK ANIS

JAKARTA: Malaysia wants developing nations to speak with one voice to urge developed countries to provide information and communications technology (ICT) at affordable prices in an effort to narrow the already wide digital divide.

Malaysia felt the Group of 15 (G-15) members should participate actively and collectively in global negotiations on ICT especially when the biggest hurdle they face involve cost in financing comprehensive infostructure development.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said as developing countries, the grouping must overcome major impediments in order to seize opportunities offered by the digital era.

"First and most basic of all, we have to develop the necessary human capital but that alone is insufficient to address the requirements of the new economy.

"This should be accompanied by good infostructure as well as pragmatic legal and policy framework. In light of our inherent weaknesses, we have to foster closer co-operation and collaboration among members of our group.

"The agreement to establish a G-15 taskforce on ICT to

elaborate the modalities for the implementation of a framework for this purpose represents a concrete step forward."

The Prime Minister was speaking on behalf of the Asian member countries at the inaugural session of the 11th G-15 Summit here yesterday, which saw its two newest members — Iran and Colombia — attending the meeting for the first time.

The grouping, formed in 1989, now has 19 members, the others being Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Dr Mahathir said deregulating the provision of ICT services to check costs was not a solution as the private sector was more keen to concentrate on commercially viable projects.

He added that leaving the financing of infostructure to the private sector would not only aggravate the digital divide within the country but would also cause a greater divide between countries.

"This creates the information poverty cycle and in the process ensure that the developing remains developing," he said.

He said in Malaysia, a fund

financed through mandatory contributions from licensed operators, would be established to provide services to neglected areas apart from direct government funding to connect schools and other public institutions.

Dr Mahathir said members must also create a knowledge society, enhance the level of adaptability, create awareness and change well-entrenched business and working practices.

In the financial sector, Dr Mahathir expressed disappointment that little progress had been made to reform the

international financial architecture despite the painful lessons drawn from the Asian financial crisis.

"It has become all too clear that the IMF is more a political instrument than one for financial rehabilitation.

"Nevertheless, Malaysia is encouraged by the G-15 consensus that we assume a more pro-active role in the reform process. To give effect to this commitment, Malaysia will convene a meeting of G-15 experts in the next few months," he said.

The Prime Minister also said that while it had to some

extent brought benefits, globalisation had also exacerbated the vulnerabilities of developing countries and eroded their national policy-making capacity.

The Prime Minister who called on Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid yesterday evening is scheduled to meet Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri today.

He is expected to hold a dialogue with the Malaysian community at the embassy and attend the G-77 meeting on Friday before returning to Kuala Lumpur.