

Five Asean working groups to conduct studies on telecoms

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THE layman's idea of the telecommunications industry being just the catalyst in making and receiving phone calls is no longer true after the boom in the telecommunications, media and technology (TMT) stocks two years ago

Many of the prices of these stocks have come back to earth but the promise that the sector holds is still "reaching for the sky."

What the boom did was to increase awareness of the TMT sector which has become a closely watched sector among analysts. This is in line with the increased demand for telephone services against the explosion in the Internet sector.

In view of some of the issues that have cropped up, Asean telecoms ministers from 10 countries had, for the first time, gathered in Kuala Lumpur last week to conduct the first round of meetings to explore ways to collaborate with each other.

The mood at the meetings was positive, each senior official and minister eager to give their input and share their experience and/or learn from others.

Five working groups were established to conduct studies, promote activities and programmes together, all for a good cause.

One important area which every country was keen to explore was the Internet. Some Asean countries have high penetration rates, others limited access to the World Wide Web.

Therefore, all the officials agreed that a working group be formed to leverage on the usage of the Internet and at the same time look into the negative effects.

Malaysia will lead the working group with Thailand as co-leader.

Malaysia's prime minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad called for the setting up of a regional body to counter the problem of rising incidence of cyber-crimes and the increasing use of Internet for misinformation.

"We are developing a communications and IT industry and there are several Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) flagship applications which we can export to other countries, including the Asean region.

"Likewise, the other Asean countries may have some products or services which can encourage trade among the member countries," Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia secretary general Datuk Dr Halim Shafie said.

The other issue of much interest is digital divide.

Singapore enjoys a 48% teledensity for

telephones lines, and in Malaysia there are 19 fixed phone lines to every 100 people; however, in countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar, the rate is below 1%.

Thus bridging the gap is crucial and a working group led by Malaysia will be set up to propose on how to bridge the gap. Vietnam and Indonesia will be co-members of the working group on digital divide.

Three other working groups will be set up — Asean infrastructure development; capacity building and trade facilitation.

The Philippines will lead the working group for Asean infrastructure development while Singapore will be co-leader. Thailand will lead for capacity building, with countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar as co-leaders.

Indonesia has been asked to lead the working group on trade facilitation but Jakarta has yet to confirm.

The setting up of the Asean Telecommunications Ministers Forum (Telmin) and the Asean Telecoms senior officers meeting (Telsom) is to pave the way for better coordination of telecoms activities in the region.

This is necessary since rapid changes are taking place in the sector and with the advent of Asean Free Trade Area (Afta), the region should work as one body and not individually.

"People do not look at individual countries but the region. It is how we can enhance the region and attract investment and trade. Eventually all countries in Asean will benefit.

"Therefore, competitiveness is vital," Halim said.

Thailand's Post and Telegraph Department director general Sethaporn Cusripituck said the meeting agreed on a mutual recognition agreement (MRA) whereby all the Asean countries would mutually recognise the type approvals.

"The MRA would ensure easy entry of telecoms products," Sethaporn said.

However, Halim said, every country should have its own labs to test the product before the MRA came into effect.

There are other things in the pipeline which are likely to be discussed at the second meeting in Philippines.

This would include all trade negotiations on telecoms and IT matters be conducted by Telmin/Telsom rather than the respective ministries of trade.

Asean has a long way to go compared to the telecoms development and telephone penetration levels in Europe, but at least there is some concerted effort to move ahead jointly now