

Dangers of unbridled

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DURING the World Economic Forum in Davos last January, the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan reiterated that if the international community cannot make globalisation work for all, in the end it will work for none.

The general consensus among the forum participants is that the process of globalisation is producing uneven and sometimes unfair results which result in widening the divide between the haves and the have-nots. South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki summarised his paper in one of the sessions by saying that "unless action is taken to bridge this divide, we must expect the poor, disenfranchised and disempowered will at some point say no".

And Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned against the danger of unbridled globalisation. In the opening speech for the International Conference on Globalisation held last Monday, he said that it is time to throw off the intellectual hegemony of globalisation theologians and to put people before profit so as to ensure there are more winners and fewer losers in this era of globalisation.

Eight divides have been identified where the process of globali-

sation acts as a catalyst to make these divides more widening. The divides are categorised as wealth, power, rights, health, education, environment, economy and technology.

The disparity is very real where on one side are the powerful and wealthy and, on the other side, the powerless and the very poor.

Power divide, for example, shows that multinational companies sometimes are more powerful than a government of a nation or that an out-of-control financial market creates chaos to the poorest nations.

Among the eight, technology divide plays the most critical and prominent role. The technology divide, sometimes more popularly known as the digital divide, deals with the disparity between certain percentage of people or country that have the best technology at their disposal.

And then there is another group of people or country, for one reason or other, that doesn't have the most basic technology.

Technology is a crucial input in the process of industrialisation and development of any country. In this era of globalisation where emphasis is given to international competitiveness, the importance of

technology as a factor determining the growth prospects of a country has gone even further up.

The key word to a successful technology generation is innovation. But with globalisation, this innovative activity has been highly concentrated in a handful of developed countries. And the most sorry state is that this activity is highly dominated by a small number of corporations in developed countries.

One of the most reliable factors to determine this innovative activity is patents obtained by inventors from different countries at the US Patents and Trademark Office. Since inventors from around the world are most likely to register their invention in the US, the world's biggest market and one providing the most stringent and longest duration of patents (25 years), the US patents' database is considered as surrogates of technological output especially for comparison purposes.

A quick look at the trends of the pattern ownership reveals that an extreme form of concentration with just 10 countries accounting for the bulk of all the technological activities in the world. The United States, Japan, Germany, France, UK, Italy, Canada, Netherlands,

globalisation

Sweden and Switzerland account for more than 95 per cent of technological output in terms of patents taken out in the US.

Except for Japan, these countries represent either the North America or European region. United States holds more than 55 per cent of the ownership share while Japan a distant second with 22 per cent of the total share.

Among the Asean countries, Singapore and Malaysia are the top two countries that hold US patent ownerships. Singapore holds 1,406 of patents while Malaysia has 384 patents granted by the US Patents and Trademark Office.

Most of the patents granted to the Malaysian inventors stem from the recent last four years of activities.

Taiwan and South Korea represent the bulk of patent ownerships for Asian countries. But other Asian countries such as Israel, China, Singapore and India are showing an increasing trend of patenting in the US.

Malaysia is obviously lagging in terms of patent ownerships. Considering the number of researchers, scientists, institutions of higher learning, research institutions and multinational corporations Malaysia has, the figure doesn't look

good.

Steps must be taken by these institutions so that their researchers and scientists are not burdened with unnecessary paperwork for patent applications.

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, through its Research Management Centre, has adopted a policy called the Intellectual Property Policy in order to establish a sound framework for the encouragement of high quality research, invention, creative work and technology transfers.

Among other things, the policy aims to make it easier for researchers to apply for patent ownerships.

The patent ownership trend is considered important because it reflects on the amount of expenditure on research and development. Countries with high patent ownerships are expected to be technology exporters in the future.

In this highly globalised world, Malaysia has no choice but to "innovate" in order to survive the New Economy era.

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