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Ongkili-Namibia

DIGITAL DIVIDE CAN HAMPER DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, SAYS ONGKILI

KOTA KINABALU, Sept 12 (Bernama) -- A Malaysian delegate today told the 48th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) conference in Namibia that the digital divide can have enormous political implications on the democratic process in developing countries if no concrete and prompt steps are taken to address the problem.

Dr Maximus Ongkili, addressing a workshop on "The Digital Divide and the Threat of Cyber-Terrorism" at the eight-day conference, said the long-term effects of digital divide on society were not simply economic in nature but also political since information and communication technology (ICT) was increasingly affecting political decision making and political process in many countries.

"In many developed countries today, legislators are increasingly using ICT to communicate, disseminate information, and interact with their electorate through the use of e-mail, video conferencing, messaging system, digital imaging, and e-learning," he said.

Extracts of Ongkili's address were made available to the Bernama office in Kota Kinabalu via e-mail.

Ongkili said: "Legislators and electorate that fail to use ICT for political engagement will sooner or later be severely disadvantaged, thereby hindering the participation of the masses in the political and democratic processes."

The 48th CPA Conference attended by some 400 legislators and parliamentary officers from over 50 Commonwealth countries is being held in the Namibian capital of Windhoek. It ends on Saturday.

The conference was declared open by the Prime Minister of Namibia, Theo-Ben Gurirab, last Sunday in a ceremony filled with glittering cultural performances by Namibian indigenous groups.

Ongkili, who is Bandau Member of Parliament, said developing countries could learn from the experiences of Malaysia in addressing the digital divide problem.

"In Malaysia the national government recognises fully that digital divide is a serious impediment to development and unless appropriate actions are taken to mitigate it, many groups will fail to share the benefits derived from the use of ICT.

"For this reason the Malaysian government, guided by its National IT agenda (NITA), has been proactive in formulating strategies and action plans to bridge the divide by focusing on specific vulnerable groups in the country.

"The identified target groups are the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, urban and rural poor, women and youth, and the aged and disadvantaged," he said.

Ongkili, who is sole Sabah representative in Malaysia's National IT Council chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, added that digital divide existed between the developed and developing countries as well as between urban and rural sectors in a given developing country.

He stressed that effective digital divide redressal programmes would necessarily include provision of basic ICT infostructure to ensure connectivity and expansion of IT education including the teaching of English in order for ordinary people to access the information superhighway.

-- BERNAMA

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