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Going boldly with Dr Mahathir

By Arni Shahida Razak

FORMER Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1993 threw a challenge to Malaysians, urging them to explore Antarctica, the world's largest continent. And in February 2002, at the age of 76, he spent nine days in the huge ice-covered continent with Cabinet ministers and other dignitaries.

"Universiti Sains Malaysia is still so inspired by him. He has opened up windows of opportunities far beyond our dreams. His challenges stirred us to work even harder. In fact, because of Tun, we now have a group of committed and enthusiastic scientists who went to Antarctica and still want to continue their research there," said USM vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dzul kifli Abdul Razak.

However, the mission to Antarctica was just the beginning.

Dr Mahathir's vision of the Multimedia Super Corridor, which was conceived in 1996, influenced USM to promote the use of information and communication technology (ICT) at the university. It also became the first university in the country to establish a School of Computer Sciences and is leading projects with other Asian countries in areas relating to computing.

"The university will be awarding him with a doctorate in science at this year's convocation for his contributions to the nation. As a science university, we want to see that the highest honour and recognition be given to people like him for working hard to promote science and technology in the country.

"Even his thinking and vision for the country are very much based on science," he said

Dr Mahathir's innovations, he added, had reinvigorated industrialisation in the country.

"Just look at our automotive sector, Petronas, MSC and other huge projects that have been anchored on science and technology. Those were the brainchild of the former Prime Minister and they have been catalysts for technological advancement in the respective areas," he said.

USM's latest connection with Cuba was also triggered by Dr Mahathir's enthusiasm in seeking new ventures with Third World and developing countries.

"When Dr Mahathir visited Cuba in 1997, the potential wasn't immediately recognised. However, when we visited Cuba last year, we were taken aback at the kind of science that the country has to offer.

Cuba has a lot of potential especially in biotechnology, treatment of cancer, development of new equipment based on molecular medicine and brain science.

"We are now tapping their expertise and collaborating with them in these areas so that we can prepare ourselves to face the next frontier," he said.

The vision that Dr Mahathir had for the country was aligned with the dreams of the university.

"Because of his aim to boost science and technology efforts in the country, we are compelled to work even harder and realise our full potential. Who would have guessed that we could have our own scientists working at research stations in Antarctica? Now, these scientists are also capable of organising trips to other sea frontiers," he said

He added that Dr Mahathir's enthusiasm for ICT had also compelled USM to

make ICT a part and parcel of the university. Penang's proposed CyberCity will see the conversion of a portion of the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone on the island (which is linked to USM's main campus at Minden) into the MSC Cyber-City.

"The push given from the MSC augurs well for us and maybe now we can play a more meaningful role in the development of ICT.

"We are proud to say that USM was accorded MSC status recently."

"Most of the things that we do resulted from Dr Mahathir's constant pushing of Malaysians to try out new things and to explore new horizons. It's the challenges that are constantly thrown at us that drive USM to strive for excellence."

He added that USM would publish a book containing Dr Mahathir's previous addresses on science and technology. "He (Dr Mahathir) has a different way of looking at science. We want to acknowledge it," he said.

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