

12/02/2003

All must be connected

FOR a country that has more cellular phone users than subscribers of fixed-line telephones, it is ironic that Malaysia still has large pockets not covered by any of the cellular networks. There are many of these areas and they are not necessarily remote, including Upper Perak, the highlands, many parts of Kelantan and most districts in Sabah and Sarawak. Even certain corridors off the North-South Expressway and parts of Putrajaya are reported to be facing intermittent shutouts for lack of proper coverage.

This does not do justice to Malaysia's image as one of the countries totally caught up in the cellphone revolution and - with some mobile sets being sold for less than RM200 - a byword for communications convenience. In fact, operators are trying to outdo one another with their service promotions and there is much popularity in the use of the short-message service. This, together with aggressive handset subsidies and the take-up of prepaid services, have contributed greatly to subscriber growth in the country. Indeed, Malaysia is in the top bracket of per capita cellphone ownership in Asia.

But it is somewhat incongruous that though it is a relatively small country, Malaysia faces the problem of lack of coverage despite having five networks to serve its population. And it has once again taken Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to point out this inconsistency.

The fact that he made that comment while opening a new communications landmark - the 77-storey ultra-modern Telekom Malaysia headquarters in Kuala Lumpur on Monday - gives added meaning and significance to the circumstances, short of saying on the one hand we have this, on the other we lack that.

While striving to improve their areas of coverage, it would be of great help too if the service providers could pool their resources and overcome the monstrosity of having too many telecommunications towers that many regard as eyesores. Obviously, this could be done if the providers share the towers which would inevitably reduce costs. It is not impossible to have a situation where one company builds the towers, striving at the same time to make them aesthetically pleasing, while service providers rent them.