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Better access to embrace ICT

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VARIOUS communities in the country will have better opportunities to partake in information and communications technology (ICT)-related activities in a more meaningful manner through the incentives cited in Budget 2004 which was announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Parliament last week.

Organisations, for example, should no longer cite high access costs as a deterrent for them to use the Internet as part of their business operations with the proposed decrease of broadband Internet charges. The decrease, an incentive that forms a part of the strategy to enhance the nation's competitiveness, is seen as key to promote the wider use of e-commerce in the country.

Under the incentive, Telekom Malaysia will provide 50 per cent discount for industrial and corporate packages, beginning with 30 per cent for phase one and a further 20 per cent for phase two.

For other users, including home users, a 30 per cent reduction will be given for consumer broadband Internet charges. This should bode well for the increase in Internet literacy in the country, especially among the younger generation, as it provides lower charges for Internet access that will allow them to acquire and obtain knowledge and current information.

To ensure wider and more efficient Internet services, Jaring will be merged with tmnet, said Dr Mahathir, who is also Finance Minister.

In order to increase wider Net access in schools, a project called SchoolNet will be implemented. The programme has been implemented in almost 200 schools in remote areas of Sabah and Sarawak. Coupled with this, smart school programmes will be rolled out in stages across the country.

Another move to boost wider usage of ICT among the population is the emphasis to include the disabled to be part of the ICT mainstream.

To ensure the disabled also benefit from ICT, a pioneer ICT resource centre will be established in Sungai Buloh to train the visually and hearing impaired in the necessary skills.

Complementing the initiative, the Government plans to provide ICT enablers to facilitate the disabled to use them as a communications aid, particularly at zebra crossings and during emergencies.

In parallel with the effort to use ICT to increase national competitiveness, more funds now are available to local technopreneurs through the increase of some RM300 million of venture capital fund for Malaysian Venture Capital Management (Mavcap) to further promote the development of private VC companies. This increases the total amount of funds under Mavcap to RM800 million.

In addition, the Government has established the Malaysian Debt Venture with RM650 million fund in the Malaysian Technology Development Corp with the fund of RM1 billion to finance investments in areas such as logistics and modernisation of agriculture.

In relation to the funds, Budget 2004 proposed for Multimedia Development Corporation to expand its role to become a one-stop agency, similar to the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority, for selected services sectors. This will involve hand-holding and guiding investors in obtaining approvals from various authorities, with the view to expedite their project implementation.