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Emphasis on MSC, ICT will be continued, says Abdullah

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today gave a firm commitment that he would continue all successful projects introduced by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, especially the Multimedia Super Corridor, when he becomes Prime Minister in October.

Saying the success of the MSC had exceeded all expectations, the Deputy Prime Minister added that the MSC would remain a priority programme.

At a dialogue after opening the two-day MSC ICT Policy Summit, Abdullah said there had been questions on whether he would continue giving priority to the MSC when he became Prime Minister.

"I won't de-emphasise it. Indeed, ICT is an important tool that can improve a country's competitive position in the global economy and support a broad range of development objectives."

He said seven years after the MSC's official launch and three days before the launch of its second phase, it had achieved much that Malaysians could be proud of.

"This year, 21,102 jobs were created within the MSC, of which 17,369 or 82 per cent are knowledge-worker opportunities. This represents an almost 10-fold increase from the 2,190 jobs and 1,946 knowledge-worker positions on offer in 1997.

"Total sales of MSC-status companies rose from RM3.93 billion last year to an estimated RM5.83 billion this year. Next year, total sales are expected to rise to RM7.98 billion, with exports estimated to increase to RM1.82 billion," he said at the Palace of the Golden Horses in Seri Kembangan, near here.

The summit, organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, is attended by local and foreign representatives from the information and communications technology sector.

It serves as a platform to discuss issues and develop ideas towards the formulation of policies on the MSC and ICT in the country.

Abdullah said when the MSC was launched, there were reservations about whether Malaysia could handle the project.

"But we have done well. The Prime Minister will, in fact, be launching its second phase on Friday.

"The focus of phase two, which will take us up to 2010, will be on developing a web of corridors. It is envisioned that the MSC will be further linked to other cyber cities in Malaysia, and those in other countries."

More Malaysians would begin to feel the real impact of the MSC in their daily lives, as particular flagship applications such as the Smart Card and Smart School were rolled out to the rest of the country.

"There will also be a stronger emphasis on the development of local technopreneurs."

Expounding further on the MSC's successes, Abdullah said a few targets relating to the MSC had been revised to accommodate the better than expected numbers.

"Cyberjaya is gaining an enviable reputation as the destination of choice for big-name IT and other related companies such as Ericsson, HSBC, Shell, NTT MSC and IBM - these companies have begun to relocate their regional shared services centres there.

"With more world-class companies participating in the MSC, Malaysia has a real opportunity to become a haven for shared services, and to carve out

a new niche for itself."

The flagship applications were also progressing well, key successes being the Smart Card and Smart Schools.

"I believe much of the current success of the MSC stems from the strong policy framework put in place to guide its development.

"Malaysia intends to add a data protection law, electronic transaction law, and an electronic government law to cater for new forms of transactions and governance that will emerge."

However, there was a pressing need to close existing gaps between policy and implementation. In this regard, Abdullah spoke at length about the digital divide, and how important it was for the gap between the "information have-nots" and the "information haves" to be closed.

There was evidence that the divide in Malaysia was growing and would have devastating results if left unchecked.

"I have likened the digital divide to a new form of poverty. The lines that divide the information haves and the information have-nots cut across not only income, but also geo-graphic, ethnic and even gender lines.

"In terms of gender, males account for 69 per cent of all Jaring subscriptions, outnumbering females who account for only 31 per cent."

He said the second gap to close was between the supply and demand of highly skilled human resources and talent, and the third was the gap between the needs of local industry participants, and the facilities and programmes currently offered.

At a Press conference later, Abdullah said he would like to see more local products within the MSC.

He also said the younger generation would be given more opportunities to contribute to the MSC's development.