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40 rural post offices to offer Internet classes

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Forty post offices in rural areas will offer community Internet classes as part of the Government's efforts to bridge the digital divide.

Each post office will be expanded to house a computer room where classes will be conducted. Each post office will be supplied with at least five computers. Pos Malaysia Bhd will spend about RM2 million on the project.

"We have implemented the plan in three test sites and we believe this is an effective approach to extend Internet connectivity to rural areas," Energy, Communications and Multimedia Ministry secretary-general Datuk Dr Halim Shafie said.

The plan takes the Government's existing Internet Desa programme a step further, by having in place steps to ensure participants at the selected sites can generate their own content rather than merely use the Internet passively.

"We especially want young people in rural areas to learn to create their own websites for their community.

"Things are going well, and I understand classes at the three test sites have been fully booked until the end of the year," he said.

The three sites are in Kota Marudu, Sabah; Bau, Sarawak; and Sungai Air Tawar, Selangor. The 40 new sites will bring the number of Internet Desa sites to 56 by year end.

Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie had earlier said a community-based approach was the best way to introduce the Internet to rural areas, rather than the "one computer per home" approach.

Efforts to bridge the digital divide will focus on schools and community centres such as post offices in rural areas.

Some RM10 million has been allocated under the Eighth Malaysia Plan for the Internet Desa centres alone.

While there may be a slight delay in efforts to connect 10,000 rural schools to the Internet by year end, Leo Moggie said the Government has done all it could to speed up implementation.

"To achieve our target of connecting 10,000 schools by end of the year, we have to start in June and it's July now. The proposal is pending approval, but it should come soon," he told reporters at the soft launch of the Malaysia ICT Week 2003 yesterday.

He also said the issue of digital divide would feature prominently in discussions at the Seventh Multimedia Super Corridor International Advisory Panel (IAP) meeting in September.

The IAP meeting, to be chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will be held from Sept 4 to 6 at Cyberview Lodge Resort, Cyberjaya.