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Mobile phone coverage mainly in cities, towns, high-density areas

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - A survey of mobile phone coverage by major telecommunications operators has shown that it is concentrated mainly in cities, towns and high-density areas.

Based on information from the websites of Celcom, DiGi, Maxis, TIMECel and TMTouch, all major cities and the areas surrounding them enjoy GSM900 or GSM1800 network coverage, while mountainous and heavily forested areas towards the inland are largely devoid of such services.

Coverage is also sparingly concentrated along the west coast of the peninsula extending from Kangar in the north to Johor Baru in the south, while the east coast is covered along the shoreline, around areas with larger numbers of residents.

This, however, can be attributed to the higher density of forests and mountains towards the centre of the peninsula.

The same appears to apply to Sabah and Sarawak, with pockets of coverage in better populated zones, largely focused around cities such as Kota Kinabalu and Kuching.

Inland areas, especially those near the Indonesian border, lack coverage.

The Celcom Art 900 analogue (010) mobile service, which uses a different technology, appears to have the single most extensive coverage across Malaysia, reaching most of the inland areas on the peninsula and larger areas in Sabah and Sarawak.

On Monday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad challenged telecommunication operators to work together to provide blanket cellular telephone coverage nationwide, ensuring that "not a single area in the country, even at the foot of high mountains, was excluded from coverage".

He lamented that certain areas still lacked coverage and this situation did not give a good impression of the country's technological abilities and efforts.

To their credit, almost all the service providers have incorporated domestic roaming to complement each other's quality of coverage in selected areas, with Maxis partnering with TIMECel in December last year.

Celcom and TMTouch, which are in the midst of a merger, have also launched domestic roaming.

Meanwhile, TIME dotCom Bhd, operator of TIMECel, stated that telecommunication operators had been sharing infrastructure, evident in a memorandum of understanding signed on Nov 2, 2001 among five companies to optimise and consolidate resources.

According to Maxis, an estimated 40 to 50 per cent of new telecommunication towers were being shared by at least two operators, following the MoU.

Operators are often hampered by arduous or long periods needed to obtain approval for cell sites, as well as the high cost of setting up networks.

DiGi Telecommunications Sdn Bhd said in a statement that it was in the midst of a major network upgrade programme and its network rollout was on track.

"Our coverage expansion will cover buildings, town centres, housing and industrial estates and commercial areas across the country," said its chief technical officer Jon Eddy.

Other cellular phone service providers could not be reached for details.