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## Increased efforts to prevent blindness

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The National Unity and Social Development Ministry will step up efforts to stop the incidence of blindness in the country.

Avoidable blindness has reached alarming proportions and requires "drastic action", Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman said today.

She said the ministry, through the National Advisory and Consultative Council for people with disabilities, would have a technical working committee look into blindness and other disabilities.

"It pleases me to say that the RM2 million for efforts to reduce blindness approved by the Finance Minister and our Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) will be used on information and communications technology projects for the Malaysian Association for the Blind."

She said this was to ensure that Malaysians who were blind, especially children, would have equal access to technology and knowledge.

"We have to come out with strategies that will reach more people. The approach will include co-operation with all sectors involved, such as non-governmental organisations, so that we can reach those at the ground."

She said it was important to form a well-planned strategy so that Malaysia could fulfil its target of eradicating avoidable blindness by 2020.

"According to statistics, the World Health Organisation estimates that by 2020, the number of blind people in the world will double unless something is done to stop it."

She was speaking after opening the two-day Avoidable Blindness Conference of Asia organised by the Tun Hussein Onn National Eye Hospital Malaysia, the Group 7 Rotary Clubs of District 3300, and Rotavision 2020 (Zone 6) of Rotary International.

From the 105,294 disabled persons registered with the Welfare Department, 12.6 per cent are blind.

Asia Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology secretary-general Professor Arthur S.M. Lim said Malaysia had the best chance among all other countries he had visited to eliminate avoidable blindness by 2020.