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PM calls for blanket coverage (HL)

By Chok Suat Ling

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Blanket cellular telephone coverage nationwide - this is what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would like the nation's telecommunications companies to work together to provide.

Saying this was not impossible, he urged Telekom Malaysia Berhad and other service providers to ensure "not a single area in the country, even at the foot of high mountains, was excluded from coverage".

He said there were still complaints from mobile phone users that some areas remained outside cellular coverage. (Areas lacking cellular coverage are said to include parts of Sungai Buloh, Kuala Lumpur, and even Putrajaya.)

"This does not give a good impression of our technological abilities and efforts. I hope our telecommunications service providers will take note of this and strive to extend mobile phone coverage throughout Malaysia," he said at the opening of Menara Telekom in Jalan Pantai Bahru today. The 77-storey Menara Telekom, towering 310m, is Telekom Malaysia's new corporate headquarters.

Dr Mahathir urged service providers to share telecommunications towers to lower costs and make the skyline more pleasing to the eye.

He said some areas had three or four towers, some of which were ugly.

"I hope efforts are made to ensure that companies share the towers.

"There should be one company building the towers, striving at the same time to make them aesthetically pleasing, while service providers rent the towers. This is our hope but it looks like (service providers) do not want to form this efficient and beneficial alliance by sharing towers."

Dr Mahathir said Telekom Malaysia had achieved much and was raking in billions of ringgit in profit, whereas in the past the Government had to subsidise the telecommunications service.

"This proves that privatisation is good and can help us successfully keep abreast of the rapid pace of technological advancement. Without privatisation, I do not think we can do this.

"Although privatisation has had its critics, they can now see that it has brought many benefits to the nation."

He said Telekom Malaysia staff too had reaped many benefits from privatisation, including better wages.

"If Telekom Malaysia had not been privatised, the staff would not have been able to enjoy their current wages as the Government would not have sufficient allocation to increase their wages and allowances, because it would then have to also increase the salaries of the rest of the civil service.

"But because Telekom Malaysia is privatised, its staff can enjoy a separate salary structure."

The Government, said the Prime Minister, was confident that although privatisation sometimes failed, especially during economic downturns, it was generally a good approach that would facilitate and propel the country's progress.

"With the opening of Menara Telekom, the staff will not just be getting a comfortable new building but it may perhaps help bring in more earnings for the company."

Dr Mahathir said although it had taken some time, the completion of Menara Telekom signified the advance of the country's telecommunications

services.

Tracing the historical development of telephone services, Dr Mahathir recalled when it could take up to two years to get a telephone line in the office or at home.

"This was not because there were no telephone lines, but the procedure to obtain a phone licence took a long time. When things take a long time, there will inevitably be problems. Therefore, if we had not privatised, we would have been left behind."

The Prime Minister observed that telephones now were very widely used not just for speech but also to send text messages and pictures. Some telephones, he noted, were so sophisticated that they were virtually small computers.

"As technological advance is so rapid, we must not think we have seen the end of advancements in telephony."

Dr Mahathir said Telekom Malaysia now had many competitors. "In this competitive arena, it is important that efficiency to customers is ensured and maintained."

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