

The Opening Ceremony Of The 1999 International Wireless And Telecommunications Symposium/Exhibition

The ITM Resort And Convention Centre, Shah Alam 19 May 1999

It is a great pleasure for me to be invited here today to officially open The 1999 International Wireless and Telecommunications Symposium and Exhibition. I am especially honoured that my opening address is in conjunction with the World Telecommunications Day.

2. I would like to extend a sincere welcome to everyone. We are very pleased to welcome the participants who have come from many faraway places to attend this symposium. I am also delighted to be able to share with the participants some thoughts about the challenges of wireless telecommunications in the next century.

3. Let me begin by being politically current and correct regarding wireless telecommunications. When the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) was founded in 1865, the telegraph was the cutting edge of technology. In 1876 Alexander Graham Bell made the first telephone call when he uttered and transmitted the famous words to his assistant, 'Mr. Watson, come here, I want you'. The birth of wireless through the first microwave radio link was around 1950 and satellite communication began in 1962. The first cellular phone made its appearance in 1983. The Internet made its presence felt at the beginning of this decade.

4. And today, the cutting edge of technology has dramatically changed. One hundred and thirty four years after the telegraph, global telecommunications have become a complex web of intelligent networks linked by fibre optic cables, traditional copper wires, microwave, satellite systems, cellular mobile systems and high-speed computers. Interestingly, the basic mission of the ITU remains unchanged. It was founded upon the principle that telecommunications should be available anytime and anywhere regardless of national boundaries. That principle is still true today.

5. I will not be so bold as to tell the participants, who are the experts in telecommunications, what the future holds one hundred and thirty four years from now. I will only be brave enough to infer what is in store for us in the early part of the 21st century, perhaps up to around the year 2020.

6. Between now and the year 2020, projection studies have shown that the population of the world will have grown from around five billion to something like nine billion. And it is believed that the greatest test for human society as it confronts the 21st century is how to use the power of technology to meet the demands created by the power of population.

7. Telecommunications in the coming century will be digital, mobile and personal. For we are now witnessing a technological progress forging ahead faster than ever before in human history. It is sweeping forward in an unpredictable fashion

on a wave of powerful global communication networks of ever-increasing performance and capacity. The demand for faster information, anywhere, anytime is also stimulating an unprecedented growth in the telecommunications industry. As societies become increasingly more information-based, consumers everywhere hunger for more, faster and better information. And this trend will continue. As for the telecommunications industry, the challenge is to adapt to these changes in demand, to provide the new form of services that the customers want - efficiently and effectively.

8. In the last five years, wireless voice communications have expanded significantly. Wireless technologies hold the promise for the future data transfer as we are rapidly becoming an Information Society. Wireless technologies have significant potential to serve our information needs. This potential for providing information services will result in the fastest growing market today. Wireless technologies are seen as the prime movers in the telecommunications arena.

9. Mobile wireless technologies are an obvious medium to provide access to the Internet. I understand that a number of universities around the world have built wireless networks on the campus. These networks enable staff and students to access data from any point on the campus. A student can even sit under a tree with a laptop and do a research assignment on the Internet.

10. Wireless technologies and the Internet represent the convergence of two of the fastest growing markets and developing technologies in the telecommunications field. This convergence of technology is certainly one important element in the telecommunications landscape. We can no longer distinguish and demarcate telecommunications, computers and broadcasting. Convergence also involves merging of the old analogue technologies with new digital technologies. And convergence of all these sectors is bringing along exciting new ways of accessing, processing and disseminating information all around the world.

11. The impact of convergence will see tremendous growth in products such as personal video-conferencing systems and new kinds of messaging like voice and even video e-mail early in the next century. Convergence will see telecommunications, computer, broadcasting and information dissemination being interwoven to deliver cutting-edge audio-visual and multimedia services over a variety of forms. It will not be long before the Internet, electronic mail, and voice are all available over a mobile cellular phone.

12. The integration of services is the strategic thinking of the future; whether it is a fixed telephone, TV entertainment, access to the Internet or a mobile phone. Customers increasingly want a breadth of services from single service provider. Logically, why should telephone, TV, data, the Internet and the rest all come down differently from different service providers when it all consists of the same fundamental digital bits? Instead of having a satellite dish, a TV aerial, a fixed phone line, a mobile phone and another for the Internet, all from different service providers, the question that begs to be answered is why not have all these services from one single supplier ?

13. In fact telecommunications service providers are advocating seamless global telecommunications networks so that they can better meet the needs of their customers around world. They have recognised that global telecommunications networks are more productive and profitable although they are rather competitive.

14. For a developing country like Malaysia, telecommunications is very important. The Malaysian Government has promoted building its telecommunications service industry under the control of local entrepreneurs. As the new millennium dawns, the local telecommunications industry is expected to play a more prominent role in helping to create an informed society, as embodied in Vision 2020.

15. Malaysia has the prospects and the opportunity to become a major global hub for telecommunications and multimedia services. In fact the prospects for our economic growth and progress are tied to our ability to master the new telecommunications technologies and thus dramatically improve our capacities in every field of business, industry and life in general.

16. The Government has introduced several policy adjustment in our effort to shape the future of our telecommunications industry. These include further liberalisation of the industry through the introduction of competition in 1990. This will eventually lead to a full-fledged competition through the Equal Access Policy which became effective early this year. Thus Malaysia has become one of the most liberalised and open telecommunications services markets in this region.

17. Malaysia has also just introduced the new Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 which was passed by Parliament in its July session last year. The Act is the first legislation of its kind in the global effort to address the issues arising from the convergence of the telecommunications, broadcasting and computing industries. The Act will promote and regulate the new industry established as a result of the convergence process.

18. Among the specific aims of policy initiatives that have been undertaken by the Government for the telecommunications sector is to position the country as a competitive telecommunications service provider and a world class market player. The challenge faced by the local players is to ensure that they can measure up to the foreign competitors. The challenge faced by the regulators meanwhile is to ensure that competition will be free without leading to a situation where the country's overall infrastructure development will be compromised.

19. Let me reiterate that Malaysia's telecommunications industry will continue to exert an enormous and dynamic influence for change in the country. The pervasive influence of new and more advanced technologies, as well as the realities of a global infrastructure, makes it necessary for us to become active participants in the world marketplace. The telecommunications industry, I believe, will play a proactive role in leading and transforming the Malaysian economy into an information-based economy of the 21st century.

20. On this note I have great pleasure in declaring open this 1999 International Wireless and Telecommunications Symposium and Exhibition.