Malaysia launches futuristic multimedia city

Bill Tarrant

Standing on a hill surrounded by rubber and oil palm plantations, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on Saturday launched what is being touted as the world's first planned intelligent city.

Using a 'smart card,' Mahathir sent an instruction via computer to an object resembling a space probe on the hill which then drilled a hole in the ground, launching Cyberjaya ('cyber-success' in Malay).

Aimed at luring top high-technology firms, the 7,000-hectare (17,300-acre) city will eventually support a population of 240,000. Every home will have access to the Internet and all transactions will be done with smart cards. The development, which Mahathir likes to call 'Cybercity, is located in the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a zone 15 km by 50 km (nine miles by 30 miles) stretching south from Kuala Lumpur to where a new international airport and a new federal capital called Putrajaya are also under construction.

'The establishment of the MSC, and Cyberjaya in particular, will enable Malaysians to leapfrog into the Information Age,' said Mahathir. He said it was the world's first effort at creating a planned living and working area for the information age. It would be a place 'where knowledge workers and other residents may interact freely in a relaxed social environment, thereby creating an environment conducive to promoting creativity and innovation, similar to that which prevails in the Silicon Valley in the United States,' Mahathir said.

Some 40 foreign and local firms have made commitments to locate in Cyberjaya, including US companies AT&T Corp, Intel Corp, Sun Microsystems Inc. and NCR Corp, Germany's Siemens AG, British Telecommunications Plc and Japanese firms Mitsubishi Corp. Sumitomo and Sharp. Mahathir described the response to the MSC as 'overwhelming. The government expects 200 companies will eventually settle in the corridor, but Mahathir said that the target would likely be exceeded. A joint venture between five Malaysian parties and Japan's Nippon Telegraph and

Telephone (NTT) Corp will develop Cyberjaya. The initial investment is estimated at 3.5 billion ringgit (US$1.4 billion).

The first phase of 2,800 hectares (6,900 acres) is to be completed by next April, including Multimedia University. First conceived in 1994, the corridor hopes to attract a variety of firms from software designers and electronic publishers to film production. houses and Internet service providers. Some of the flagship applications include smart schools that incorporate the Internet and other computer applications as well as telemedicine. The latter enables doctors to communicate by satellite. Its electronic backbone will be a 2.5-10 gigabyte digital fiberoptic network that will link the corridor to Japan, Europe and the United States.

The MSC will initially be driven by three mega projects that will be major consumers of multimedia products and services. One is the new capital of Putrajaya, designed to be the world’s first paperless government hub. The others are the new airport and the Kuala Lumpur City Centre, a massive office project featuring the Petronas Twin Towers, the world’s tallest buildings at 452 meters (1,482 feet).