

Malaysia's first Mobile Internet Unit launched

By LOKMAN MANSOR

THERE is still a considerable gap among Malaysians when it comes to their knowledge and skills of information and communication technology (ICT), Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

He said the penetration rate of personal computers in Malaysia this year, for example, is only 65 per 1,000 population compared with 450 in the US, 228 in Japan, and 316 in Singapore.

For 1998, the total number of internet servers worldwide was 43.2 million, of which 80 per cent was in the US, 17 per cent in other developed countries, and only 0.1 per cent in Malaysia.

"These statistics show how much Malaysia must step up and expand its ICT programmes to close the gap not just among Malaysians but also with other countries," Abdullah said.

He was speaking at the launch of Malaysia's first Mobile Internet Unit (MIU) or CyberCoach in Subang Jaya yesterday. The MIU pilot project is a bus equipped with ICT facilities that will provide an electronic classroom experience to rural schools around the country.

Abdullah said while some schools have less facilities and amenities than others, the Government cannot wait for all schools to be at the same level before introducing the students to ICT.

"Some schools will start

first. Others will start later. What is important is that they learn hands-on about ICT and computers," he added.

The MIU is a joint effort by the National IT Council, Ministry of Education, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Mimos Bhd and Automotive Corp (M) Sdn Bhd.

Initially, the CyberCoach will visit 20 schools in Selangor before it moves to other rural and urban marginalised schools. Schools chosen are those that have not been included in the government Smart Schools Programme, Computer in Education Programme or similar ICT initiatives conducted by non-government organisations.

Abdullah said the MIU will give these students and their teachers access to the Internet, expand their thinking, and allow for a more diversified learning experience.

"I recommend that this programme be examined further and considered for inclusion in the Eighth Malaysia Plan to help build up the capability of Malaysians in ICT," he added.

Abdullah also proposed that organisations, including the Education Ministry, National Library, Mimos and the private sector, work together to orientate their existing services (for example, mobile libraries) along the same lines as the MIU so that more Malaysians become illiterate.

Mimos chief executive



CI MIMOS chairman Tan Sri Azman Hashim (left) exchanges document with Selangor Education Department director Dr Ahmad Sipon at the launch of Mobile Internet Unit at the Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seafield Subang Jaya yesterday. In the centre is Abdullah. — *Bernamapic*

and NITC secretary Tengku Datuk Dr Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, meanwhile, announced that Mimos will donate a computer and Jaring connectivity for each of the 20 schools visited by the MIU.

Mr Phillips Young, UNDP resident representative to Malaysia, Sin-

gapore and Brunei, said once the MIU system is proven it can easily be adapted and duplicated for use elsewhere, both inside and outside Malaysia.

"We also believe that the Malaysian Government's foresight in these matters should serve as an example to all developing countries,"

he added.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, in his speech read out by NITC working group on E-Learning joint chairman Datuk Dr Zawawi Ismail, proposed that the MIU help establish ICT clubs in schools and help coordinate their activities.

"In this way we can build interest among both students and teachers. I also hope Parent Teacher Associations and other community organisations will support the unit's activities and other E-Learning projects that will be introduced later on," he added.