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My take on **WCIT 2008**

| BY SUFIA TIPPU |

The first thing that struck me was the school kids on stage. I am used to folk dances by national troupes or slick talking MCs, but watching the little ones come up on stage to greet the delegates from 90 countries at the plenary hall in KLCC in their own language — right from *Namaste to Velkomin* — sure brought out a smile.

That was unusual, especially when we had gathered for a serious event, with an even more serious-sounding name, such as the World Congress on Information Technology, or WCIT. And yet, an act so endearing that only a nation with citizens as warm-hearted as Malaysians could pull it off in style — children, ministers, CEOs and all.

That was just the beginning. The young ones set the tone for the entire event.

The ICT revolution, the wireless, the broadband, the future of the Internet and the roadmap of where Malaysia is heading, as well as the future of the entire planet — with the Blue Brain Project and the Earth simulator and genomics permeated the entire four-day congress.

The underlying message: How

ICT should be used to bridge the digital divide.

Both the tech heavyweights — Intel chairman Craig Barrett, who delivered the keynote address on “Global impact issue: A world of opportunity powered by technology”, and Microsoft chairman Bill Gates, who “appeared” as a holographic image — believed that the WCIT 2008 was the inflection point for the world, rallying emerging nations to march forward in tune with ICT.

Barrett’s keynote was nothing short of superlative. Spontaneous and genuine in his intentions to spread ICT among the developing economies (he is the chairman of the UN Global Alliance for ICT and Development, or UN GAID), he brought together representatives from different parts of the world — including Pakistan and Brazil — to showcase the kind of partnership programmes that Intel has been able to launch to make life a bit better for the underprivileged.

While Barrett said that global alliances are going to be key drivers for getting the next billion people on the Internet, and education was the only way that this could be achieved, it was just a harbinger of the things to come. Gates, or rather the 15ft holographic projection of him, said there



School children greeting the delegates from 90 countries at the plenary hall in KLCC

were a billion people out there with a PC but there were five billion out there who did not have one, and that we, read Microsoft, have to reach out to them.

Another thing that struck me was the spirit of camaraderie among the Malaysian ministers and the delegates. The prime minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was seen having great fun at the Taiwan pavilion, trying out software aimed at helping students learn Chinese. He actually scored

80 out of 100 for his pronunciation of *Ni hao*, or “Hello”. Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili, the minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, was also seen walking around and talking to delegates at the conference.

But strangely, a walk through the long halls at the exhibition had nothing much to do with the developing world, or maybe I was expecting to see computing devices for the emerging economies.

One thing that caught my attention

was the Jen-ii from Mimos, a non-keyboard device aimed at the elderly, to help them browse new recipes, follow religious classes online and also check the latest grocery prices. That was one interesting computing device, but whether it would be a hit is yet to be seen. Similarly, there was a “Simputer” which was launched in India for the segment of the market who could not afford PCs, but it just passed into oblivion. Who knows if the Jen-ii will suffer the same fate.

I cannot say that, though, about the enterprising children I met at the MoneyTree pavilion. Fifteen-year-old Najeem Zaina and 17-year-olds Joseph Nwankpo Chibuzo and Shazwi Suwandi had drawn up business plans and were talking to venture capitalists to fund their proposals. A short course at MoneyTree (which helps children, nine years and older, to become entrepreneurs and understand the money market) had propelled them into would-be, teen entrepreneurs. Just a couple of cheques and some faith in their plans could change everything.

That’s Malaysia for you at the microcosm level of WCIT 2008.

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