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August 23, 2001

Malaysia's Internet Road Show

By WAYNE ARNOLD

TUNJANG, Malaysia -- NAFIZAH ISMAIL had heard of the Internet, but she had never used it until one day in April when a special bus rolled up to her school, deep in Malaysia's northern rice bowl.

"We realized that the Internet can connect us to the outside world," Nafizah, 12, said as she and two village friends sat in their school canteen, heads covered by scarves as tradition dictates in this conservatively Muslim area. Now Nafizah is learning to prepare her homework on a computer, navigate the Internet, send e-mail and even design Web pages, as more than 2,800 other Malaysian children have done since the bus hit the road two years ago.

The bus, called the Mobile Internet Unit, is an attempt by Malaysia to help bridge its digital divide by delivering technology to its poorest, most remote schools on a 40-foot bus loaded with 20 personal computers. To the United Nations Development Program, under which the idea was conceived, the bus is an experiment in hastening the spread of the Internet to young minds in areas where infrastructure is scarce and suspicions run high.

"These mobile units are perfect in raising awareness, building interest and understanding — and reducing the fear," said Vijay Parmar, deputy regional coordinator of the agency's Asia-Pacific Development Information Program in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur.

A sort of bookmobile for the Internet age, the original bus has already been supplemented by seven scaled-down versions, and the government plans to put two in each of Malaysia's 14 states by 2005. The United Nations agency, meanwhile, has organized a similar initiative in Ghana and says countries like Lebanon and Iran have expressed an interest.

Development experts involved in the effort say the Internet can play an important role in providing education and new opportunities in such countries — or at the very least, can help them avoid falling further behind the developed world. That is no small challenge in places where villagers are lucky to have phone lines and electricity, much less an Internet cafe.

In its own development, Malaysia lies somewhere between the extremes and is trying to leap ahead. Homes in the rice-farming village where Nafizah lives have telephones and televisions. There are paved roads for motorbikes. The peasants and water buffaloes toiling in the paddies are gone; farmers hire combine harvesters to reap their crops.

And thanks in part to government initiatives, Malaysia is also

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 In Tunjang, Ho Mun Yue helps a student.

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disproportionately well networked. It has almost half as many Internet users per capita as the United States. Since the mid-1990's, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has made the creation of a "knowledge economy" a national priority, clearing a swath of oil-palm plantations for his version of Silicon Valley, seeking counsel from American technology executives and even badgering Muslim clerics to embrace the Internet.

At the same time, plans to install computers in the country's roughly 8,500 schools, starting with those in rural areas, have been slow, impeded in part by the financial crisis of 1997 and 1998 and the latest global economic slowdown. Since the endeavor was announced four years ago, only 90 of the so-called smart schools have been established.

"Malaysia is a very good country to start with," said Gabriel Accascina, who until last year headed the Asia-Pacific Development Information Program. Mr. Accascina came up with the idea for the Mobile Internet Unit based on his experience in the 1980's in Mali, when he and other aid workers used a four-wheel-drive vehicle to cart a television and videocassette recorder to rural villages to show instructional tapes. "We would go into the village and pull out the TV and hand out brochures and teach the villagers how to dig a trench or recognize malnutrition," said Mr. Accascina, who now heads his own consulting firm.

With \$75,000 in initial funds, Mr. Accascina sold the government's own technology research company, the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems, or Mimos, on his idea of an old school bus carrying personal computers down the country's muddy back roads.

Mimos had even bigger plans. It persuaded the local distributor of Isuzu vehicles to donate a \$263,000 bus tailored for the project. The result is a sleek, silver coach that is well beyond the battered bus Mr. Accascina envisioned. Three air-conditioners and a pocket of insulating air protect the computers and their users from the tropical heat. If no reliable power source is handy, a diesel-powered generator slides out of the bus's belly.

Mobile Internet Unit is something of a misnomer, however. The bus can establish Internet access only by stringing a telephone cord to a telephone jack nearby. If one is not available, pupils on the bus surf Web sites stored on the bus's computer server.

To start the program, organizers selected 20 rural schools in the state closest to Kuala Lumpur, reaching out to children from fishing villages, oil-palm plantations and rubber estates. One of the first obstacles was convincing not only educators, but village headmen, clerics and parents as well, that the bus was a good idea.

"Mostly they hear about the negative side of the Internet" — like pornography — "so they're frightened," said Kang Wai Chin, the Mobile Internet Unit's voluble project manager. "We want parents to understand the value of the Internet to their children."

The bus program is typically built around an eight-hour course delivered in one-hour installments to 20 children at a time. It starts with such basics as learning how to turn the computer on and use a mouse, then progresses to basic word processing, e-mail, Web browsing, even manipulating spreadsheets and designing simple Web pages. A visit, typically lasting one day every two weeks, can also include a teacher-training session at the lunch hour.

The Mobile Internet Unit's organizers leave behind a PC, a modem and an Internet account so that pupils can practice and teachers can find ways to work computers into the curriculum. There is another goal: to convince parents of the computers' value, prompting them, perhaps, to buy a PC for

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The Mobile Internet Unit is aimed at bridging Malaysia's digital divide by delivering technology to its poorest schools.



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the home or to raise money to equip the schools with more.

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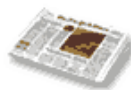
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Does all this help the pupils? It may never be possible to know for sure. The participants have yet to take standardized exams to see how they compare with nonparticipants. The Mobile Internet Unit's own progress report charts success in at least improving computing skills and awareness. Its surveys of participants showed that 39.7 percent could use a spelling checker on a document after the course, compared with only 8.9 percent before. Slightly more than half had mastered e-mail, compared with 16.6 percent before boarding the bus.

Ms. Kang concedes the project has its skeptics among Malaysian educators, many of whom feel such skills are of dubious benefit in the countryside. Their criticisms are mirrored in the broader development community, where some say money for computers in poor rural schools would be better spent for chalk, teachers or even food.

While seemingly irrelevant in an agrarian context, such skills will be crucial to those children who eventually want to move out of the shrinking agricultural sector, Ms. Kang says. At the very least, she says, computers are a way to augment anemic libraries instantly.

The project has also won fans among teachers whose schools have taken part in the program. Loh Tzu Lee, an English teacher at Sungei Pelek secondary school in Selangor state near Kuala Lumpur, one of the first schools the bus program visited, says CD-ROM's and the Internet offer a wealth of helpful, interactive lessons. "We can't prepare those kinds of activities in time for them," she said.

After he completed the bus program, Hafiz Handzalah, a Sungei Pelek ninth grader, persuaded his father to buy a computer for him to use at home. His grades have since gone up, he said, as the quality of his reports improved — as did his spelling, perhaps not only because of a spelling checker but also because of the increased amount of reading he does online.

Back in Tunjang, the headmaster, Zulkeflee Alwi, hopes the Mobile Internet Unit will do the same for his pupils. Like Nafizah, most come from rice-farming families. "They're not exposed to what's happening," Mr. Zulkeflee said. "They just know their area only." The Internet, he said, may make the larger world more tangible and relevant to his pupils — who lag behind their urban counterparts on nationwide exams — and build their confidence.

Tunjang represents a new approach for the Mobile Internet Unit. Instead of concentrating only on children, the bus is opening to their parents, as well. Because of the town's remoteness, the bus has visited

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In Tunjang, Ho Mun Yue helps a student.

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about every two months rather than every two weeks, but instead of leaving only one PC at the school, it left 10, so that the school's computer lab will stay open on weekends. "When students aren't going to school, the school is empty," Ms. Kang said. "That's a waste of resources."

Malaysia's experience is also raising interest elsewhere, said Mr. Parmar of the Asia-Pacific program. For the United Nations Development Program, "it's something we can showcase instead of talking about it all the time," he said. Poor roads and long distances may make buses impractical in countries like China and India, he said, but the project in rural Ghana could offer a clearer picture of the effect such programs can have.

In the meantime, while Ms. Kang and Mimos are screening new villages to visit with their bus, the country's biggest libraries are wheeling out new buses, increasingly taking over the Internet pied-piper role. Even in less-developed Malaysian Borneo, plans are afoot to find a way to deliver computing to jungle communities that roads have yet to reach. The plan is to build a mobile Internet boat.

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