

# NST Leader: Bridge that digital divide

NST 30.11.2020

November 30, 2020 @ 12:21am



Three students of Kampung Gusi in Ranau, Sabah, were injured last week when the suspension bridge they were standing on collapsed. -- File Pix courtesy of SMK Ulu Sugut Ranau PIBG

EARLIER last week, three students of Kampung Gusi in Ranau, Sabah, were injured when the suspension bridge they were standing on collapsed.

The incident normally would not have garnered much attention because nobody died or was seriously injured. But the reason these three poor students were on the suspension bridge in the first place was what caught the attention of many.

They were trying to get Internet connection and, apparently, that is only possible at certain parts of the bridge — suspended 18m above a river — at night.

The problem of connectivity will be solved by the middle of December, temporarily, with the use of very small aperture terminal (VSAT) broadband technology provided by a state-backed company.

The VSAT will bounce Internet signals off satellites, as opposed to physical means such as through Ethernet connections. Three telecommunication towers will also be built near the village, though it should be pointed out that these plans were already in the works before the incident at the bridge.

It is indeed good that this is being done. But it is unthinkable that this kind of thing still happens. It is not the bridge collapse that concerns this Leader so much as the fact that so many areas in Malaysia still do not have Internet connectivity, or spotty ones at best.

Malaysia ranked 30 out of 79 countries in the 2019 Global Connectivity Index. The GCI points out that we have relatively good connectivity. And we are above all other Southeast Asian countries, except, of course, Singapore, which is in fourth place.

But our score of 54 over 120 shows that we are not all that good either. By comparison, Singapore has a score of 81. There can be no denying that Singapore has an advantage in that it has a much smaller area compared with Malaysia, nor does it have to deal with mountain ranges and dense jungles. But that cannot be used as an excuse any more.

We have had a long time to get over these hurdles. It is especially important during this era of the pandemic, when school work has gone virtual and many businesses have had to strengthen their online presence.

Online studies and businesses are not the future any more — they are part of the new norm. They are the present, the here and now. That is why it is of utmost importance that we close the digital chasm between the urban and rural areas.

Leaving rural areas in the dark, so to speak, would only lead to a widening of the financial and wellbeing gap between them and the urban population of the country.

We do not want to see a repeat of the Kampung Gusi incident, nor the plight of Veveonah Mosibin, the Universiti Malaysia Sabah student living in a remote village 200km from Kota Kinabalu who had to climb a tree to get an Internet connection to take her examinations.

None of these should be happening in such a day and age. That is one reason the RM9.4 billion allocation to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission under the 2021 Budget is important.

That allocation, however, has to be wisely spent to ensure that every Malaysian, no matter where they live, gets an equal slice of the digital pie.