

# Asia Broadband Program

## – Regional Telecom Platform Linking 8 Nations and 1 Territory –

By Kitamoto Ichiro

GIVE all people in Asia access to high-speed, high-capacity Internet service by 2010 – such an ambitious project is now being promoted by the Japanese government. The project is called an “Asia Broadband Program,” and the name of the game is information technology (IT), one of the most powerful engines moving the 21<sup>st</sup> century on a global scale. With the help of advanced IT and broadband technology, Japan hopes to invigorate the flow of information in Asia and turn the region into an “information hub of the world.” The project set out to help bridge the so-called digital divide, or a gap in the availability of information, which is closely linked to the problem of poverty in Asia. By joining hands with other IT powers such as South Korea, China and India, it would also turn Asia into the world leader in the next-generation IT field. The Japanese government has laid out a set of policies to develop region-wide telecommunications infrastructure through the nation’s official development assistance (ODA) program to achieve this goal.

Overseeing the Asia Broadband Program is Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), which is in charge of the nation’s telecommunications policy. “There is sort of an Indian boom in Kasumigaseki government quarter” says Uchida Kensuke, who is involved in the Asia Broadband Program as a MIC official in the Telecommunications Bureau’s International Affairs Department. Uchida notes that the Japan-India Joint Statement on Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), signed in January this year, is part of the Asia Broadband Program. When Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited India in April, cooperation in information technology became a focal point in the joint statement issued by the leaders of the two countries.

India is in the global spotlight as a major player in computer software, and a most sought-after IT partner for Japan. MIC has already agreed with India to jointly develop next-generation computer networks and “ubiquitous” computer services that make Internet access possible anytime, anywhere. The public and private sectors of the two countries are already taking concrete moves, such as organizing discussion forums to promote these projects, according to Uchida.

The Asia Broadband Program was contained in the e-Japan Program, a comprehensive IT policy package approved by the government, and detailed blueprints were released in March 2003. Apart from MIC, the program involves six other Japanese government agencies, including the Fair Trade Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. To promote international cooperation, MIC has eagerly lined up the support of China, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Hong Kong, and in quick succession, concluded bilateral agreements of cooperation. India was the ninth Asian partner to sign up.

Apart from bilateral efforts, information and communications ministers from Japan, China and South Korea have been meeting regularly to foster their cooperative ties. Through bilateral and multilateral channels, Japan has thus built a network of cooperation with virtually all other major Asian countries. While these arrangements are meant primarily to compare notes on government IT policies and to promote the e-government project, the dialogues have enabled Japanese officials to find out what other Asian countries want Japan to do and explore possible ODA-based projects.

Asia has a substantial digital divide. MIC has divided the region into three

categories in terms of the level of information technology. The first category is represented by advanced IT countries and regions such as Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, all front-runners in global broadband services. The second category of nations typically has relatively advanced IT infrastructure but still has pockets of populations with limited access to the Internet. Among them are Thailand, Malaysia and other ASEAN nations. In the third category of nations are Mongolia, Vietnam, Nepal and Afghanistan, the countries where the basic IT infrastructure, including telephone linkage, is still very much in the rudimentary stage.

Information technology supposedly has the potential to benefit all the people in the world. At the same time, the digital divide threatens to further widen the socio-economic gap between the people with and without the access to broadband services. The Asia Broadband Program is intended to bridge this divide.

As pointed out by MIC, there is comparatively little information provided from Asia, as compared with Europe and North America. Making broadband services available throughout Asia, the ministry hopes, would increase the volume of information flow within Asia and boost its role as an information provider for the rest of the world. This, a MIC official says, “is one way to promote economic growth in Asia.”

The Asia Broadband Program has three major parts: (1) improving telecommunications infrastructure, (2) developing state-of-art Internet technologies and adopting the best methods to utilize them, and (3) personnel training.

The first area of infrastructure projects is where Japanese ODA comes into play. Current ODA programs include a ¥19.5 billion project in Vietnam to lay an offshore optics cable linking the northern and southern parts of the country, a

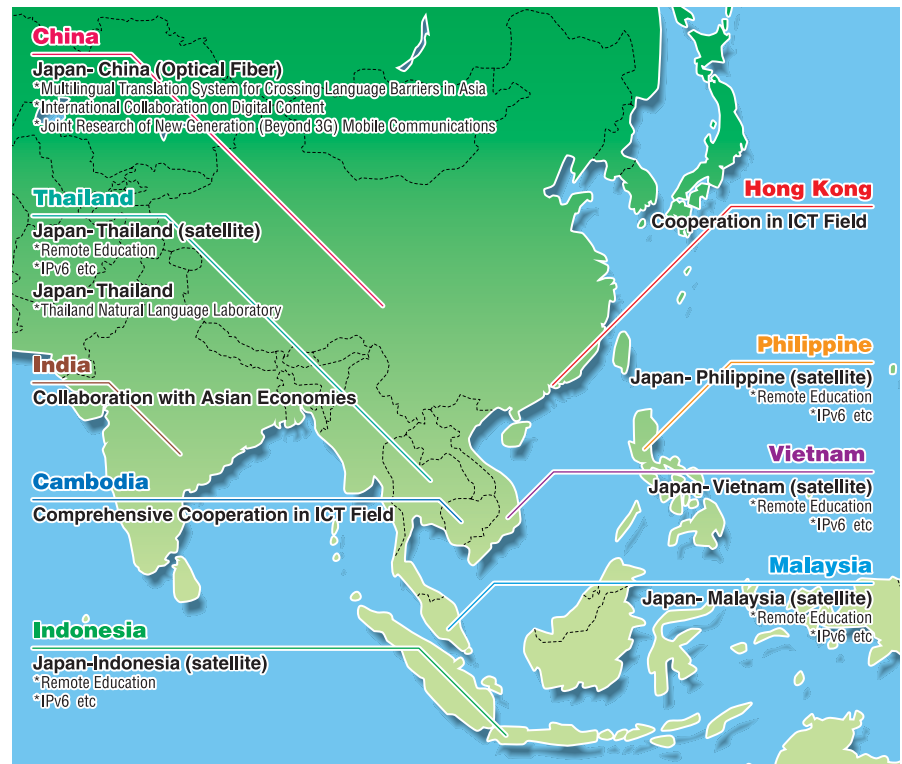
¥3.75 billion project in Cambodia to build a telecommunications turnpike in the Mekong region, and a ¥10.7 billion project to build telecommunications infrastructure in Iraq as part of international efforts to rebuild the country. All these projects are financed by low-interest Japanese governmental loans.

Since many regions in Asia do not even have a telephone system, some experts believe that the best way to attack the problem is to leapfrog traditional technologies and use the most advanced Internet protocol (IP) technology to build telecommunications infrastructure. For many local communities, for instance, one way to bridge the digital divide is to set up personal computers at public facilities such as post offices to provide public Internet service. This is an area of cooperation Japan plans to offer to Malaysia, Vietnam and other Asian nations.

With regard to research and development of the second part of the Asia Broadband Program, bilateral and trilateral agreements have been reached between Japan and India, and between Japan, China and South Korea to provide a framework to develop advanced Internet technologies. Under such a framework, telecommunications ministers from Japan, China and South Korea have held three round of talks, and the process has become officially known as the East Asia ICT Summit. The three countries have agreed to cooperate in eight areas of IT, including the next-generation Internet technology known as IPv6 protocol, next-generation mobile telephony, IC tags and digital broadcasting. The three countries are also working together to use the most advanced IT technology in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Officials of the three countries are meeting regularly at sub-cabinet levels. "We hold talks about once every two months, and I believe our work is becoming more and more solid," says Uchida.

For human resource parts, experts from MIC and other Japanese government agencies have been dispatched to various Asian countries to offer Japanese

Figure 1 Asia Broadband Network Image



Source: Adjusted from Asia Broadband Program OFFICIAL WEBSITE

IT know-how and help them formulate their telecommunications policies. The government has also sponsored exchange programs for researchers and invited trainees to provide technical instruction in Japan. In 2004, the trainee program alone hosted some 800 technicians from around Asia.

The Asia Broadband Program seems to be spreading across Asia and making strides. All things, however, are not as rosy as they appear. For one thing, the pace of support provided under Japan's ODA-based programs in the words of Japanese government official, "remains, regrettably, too slow" to close the digital divide.

At the 2000 G8 summit in Okinawa, billed at the time as an "IT summit," the Japanese government pledged to provide about \$15 billion in economic cooperation over a five-year period to FY 2005 to promote IT in the developing world. Coming amidst a budget squeeze in the overall ODA-based programs, this was clearly a bold policy declaration. However, owing presumably to a lack of understanding of IT policy in some

quarters of the government, it is doubtful whether Japan has initiated enough aid projects. Some people also feel strongly that more should be done in the development of human resources.

One example is how to tackle the digital divide in rural areas. Even if infrastructure has been built there, the prospect of narrowing the digital divide would be in jeopardy if there is a perennial shortage to Internet technologies. At present, the training program for most foreign trainees in Japan is relatively too short, generally lasting 7 to 10 days. The duration of trainee programs should be extended to one month at the very least. Some point out that a longer, more solid training program is essential because, as a senior MIC official puts it, this will increase the number of Asian IT technicians who have a favorable image of Japan, which may ultimately become Japan's long-term national interests. **JS**

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