

NATION & WORLD

Malaysian twin towers open today

BY ALVIN UNG
ASSOCIATED PRESS

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA — Cumulus clouds billow outside the window like silent chariots. A falcon perches at the pinnacle, the bird's talons skittering across polished steel.

Nearly three years after it was crowned the world's tallest skyscraper, the 1,480-foot Petronas Twin Towers officially opened today to coincide with Malaysia's Independence Day celebrations.

The builders say their 88-story skyscraper is more than just a record-breaking feat. It is a symbol of Malaysia's coming-of-age at the close of the millennium, a sky-high ego boost for the 42-year-old Third World nation.

"The Petronas Towers symbolize the new spirit of Malaysia," said Azizan Zainal Abidin, Petronas chairman.

"Building such a massive project has given us confidence. We can do what others thought we couldn't do," he said.

The Petronas Towers beat out Chicago's Sears Tower, which, at 1,450 feet, held the tallest-building title from 1973 until 1996. The title is also claimed by the CN Tower in Toronto: It stands at 1,815 feet, but that includes a tall antenna.

Tens of thousands thronged to the capital today, and every top Malaysian leader attended the celebrations. "Today is a good day to be Malaysian," said shopkeeper Ismail Omar, 38, carrying his 2-year-old son, Abdul Rahman — named after the Southeast Asian nation's first prime minister.

Petronas, the national oil and gas monopoly, start-

ed in a wooden shack amid rubber trees, then prospered in the '70s under the New Economic Policy, an affirmative action plan to advance Malays while promoting economic growth among all races.

Over the next two decades, Petronas boomed. Managed by a group of elite Malays groomed under the NEP, the company discovered gas fields in the South China Sea.

It grew to 100 subsidiaries in two dozen countries and crept into Fortune magazine's list of the world's 500 biggest companies.

Its offices sprouted in Kuala Lumpur as Malay villagers thronged into the city for factory jobs.

In the early 1990s, as the economy boomed, the government charged Petronas with the task of building itself a massive headquarters in the heart of the city — as a gift to Malaysians.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad took a passionate interest in the \$1 billion project, visiting the construction site every Sunday after the groundbreaking in August 1991.

The average Malaysian is barred from visiting the towers, which are occupied by Petronas subsidiaries and multinational companies.

But everything else in the Kuala Lumpur City Center, as the 100-acre development is called, is open to the public.

Malaysians are free to gawk at pricey Laura Ashley scarves and Salvatore Ferragamo shoes in the country's largest mall. Or they can visit the art gallery and Petrosains, an indoor science museum that simulates life on an oil rig.

On the weekends, thousands of families throng to the 50-acre park surrounded by jogging paths and lined

with 2,000 trees. The call to prayers are broadcast from a gleaming marble mosque that holds 6,000 Muslims.

Meanwhile, well-heeled Malaysians watch international musicians perform in a Viennese-flavored symphony hall with a cantilevered roof and the largest pipe organ in Asia.

Modern-day oil barons dine at the Malaysian Petroleum Club, a black-tie affair serviced by private elevators that whiz to the 41st floor in 20 seconds flat. Tux-clad waiters serve ratatouille on German tableware. Opposition leaders claim that such extravagance makes a mockery of Malays.

"The pride of the Malay civilization comes through our culture, education and morality," said Syed Husin Ali, president of the People's Party of Malaysia. "It's immoral to use Petronas money, which is the people's money, to build ostentatious monuments to please some individuals and to bail out companies."

During the Asian economic crisis, Petronas spent \$220 million to buy 11 tankers from a company controlled by Mahathir's son, Mirzan. It is also finalizing its purchase of Proton, Malaysia's ailing national car company.

But as Malaysia celebrates 42 years of independence from British rule, the government's top thinkers are jubilant.

"Our society was always a primary candidate for the dustbin of history," said Noordin Sopiee, the chairman of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

"As a people — despite our stupidity, despite our idiocies and despite our grave inadequacies — we have been able to do the impossible."

SAT's gain points, remain last nationally

BY JENNIFER HOLLAND
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAYCE, S.C. — Scholastic Assessment Test scores released Tuesday had the same old ring: South Carolina was once again last in the nation. That was despite a three-point increase in average scores to 954 — the first increase in South Carolina in two years. The national average dropped one point to 1,016.

State Education Superintendent Inez Tenenbaum said the key to raising South Carolina's scores on the college entrance exam depends on a state-led initiative, such as the Education Improvement Act of 1984. "We saw gains every year from 1983 to 1988. Since that state-led effort was abandoned, the results have been sporadic — up and down, with no steady progress," she said. South Carolina students turned in slightly higher math scores this year with an average of 475, up two points from 1998. The national average fell one point to 511. The state's average scores on verbal skills, reading and vocabulary, also gained a point to 479 this year compared with the national average of 505. Tenenbaum credited the increase to initiatives to help local school districts improve students' performances on standardized tests, including state funding for every sophomore to take the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test.

The Education Department co-sponsors a statewide SAT competition, with each high school choosing a test coach to work with students.

The department also is expected to form a partnership with The College Board, which administers the SAT, to offer more test preparation materials and training for teachers, Tenenbaum said.

Tenenbaum and Gov. Jim Hodges announced the statewide results at Brookland-Cayce High School, where the average score was 989 — 12 points better than last year and 35 points higher than the state average.

"The trend is the right trend you want," Hodges said. "We've just got to stay focused with this as a goal."

Several school districts posted a decrease in test scores in 1999 compared with last year.

Terrell's Bay High School in Marion District 3 dropped 137 points last year to an average of 731. Superintendent Everett Dean Jr. was surprised to see the dramatic drop, but said there can be great fluctuation between each year because of the small number of students taking the test.

Just 13 seniors, or 33 percent of the senior class, took the exam in 1999, compared with 17 seniors in 1998.

Dean said the high school offers SAT preparation classes as well as other activities, including a simulated SAT on computers, which is offered in several schools across the state.

On Tuesday, Tenenbaum watched Brookland-Cayce junior Misty Gurley tackle a geometry drill on the special computer software to prep students for the test.

"It makes you feel better about yourself, and you realize you can accomplish something," Gurley said about the practice.

Tenenbaum also said the state saw improvement in Advanced Placement exams, which allow high school students to earn college credit. The number of tests scoring high enough to gain college credit was 8,239, up from 8,090 last year.

"Our SAT and AP scores are improving, and that's good news," Tenenbaum said. "We still have a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the nation, however."

Anti-smoking efforts lack innovation

BY ANDREW BUCHANAN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — U.S. medical school graduates are woefully unprepared to help patients quit smoking, the nation's most deadly preventable health-care problem, a study concludes.

The researchers surveyed nearly every accredited medical school in the country and found very little coursework devoted to nicotine dependence.

They called the statistics distressing, given National Cancer Institute recommendations from seven years ago that training in how to kick the habit be made mandatory at every U.S. medical school.

The findings appear in today's Journal of the American Medical Association.

"The public health community is active and aggressive in anti-smoking efforts, but there's nothing innovative going on" at medical schools, said Dr. Linda Ferry, director of preventive medicine at Loma Linda University School of Medicine in California. "It starts right at the ground level in medical school."

Cigarette smoking kills more than 400,000 Americans each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One in every five deaths in the United States is smoking-related,

CDC figures show.

Ferry cited a 1991 survey showing that few doctors felt their formal medical training prepared them to help patients stop smoking, and another that found that few physicians advise their patients about kicking the habit.

Ferry and colleagues looked at responses from 122 of 126 medical schools about course offerings in the 1996-97 school year. Not all schools answered every question.

Thirty-two out of 102 medical schools dedicated an average of less than one hour of classroom time per year in smoking cessation techniques.

There was more tobacco-related instruction in the first two years of medical school. But only three schools reported having a required course devoted to tobacco education in the third and fourth years.

And almost 70 percent of schools — 83 of 120 — did not require any smoking cessation training at all in those two years, when students theoretically are learning how to apply their knowledge to patients.

The authors acknowledged that more smoking cessation instruction could be taking place in informal settings in the final years of medical school.

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