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ALOR STAR, JAN. 16 (BERNAMA ES) — DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD HAS ADVISED PADI FARMERS IN THE MUDA AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY AREA TO SUSPEND OFF-SEASON PLANTING NEXT MONTH AS DIRECTED BY THE GOVERNMENT.

HE SAID TODAY THE GOVERNMENT HAD ISSUED THE DIRECTIVE TO AVOID CONTINUED HARDSHIP FOR THE FARMERS.

THE PRESENT DIFFICULTY COULD BE OVERCOME IF THE FARMERS FOLLOWED STRICTLY THE GOVERNMENT'S ADVICE AND TOOK THE MEASURES OUTLINED BY IT TO HELP INCREASE THEIR INCOME, HE ADDED.

OTHERWISE, THERE WAS A POSSIBILITY THAT MANY OF THEM WOULD EXPERIENCE MORE LOSSES IN FUTURE, HE POINTED OUT.

DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR, WHO IS ALSO THE MINISTER OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY, HAD EARLIER BEEN BRIEFED ON THE DROUGHT SITUATION IN THE AREA BY MADA CHAIRMAN DATUK SYED NAHAR SHAHABUDDIN AT THE AUTHORITY'S OPERATIONS ROOM IN TELUK CHENGAI NEAR HERE.

(ALSO PRESENT WERE PERLIS MENTERI BESAR DATUK HAJI JAAFAR HASSAN, KEDAH EXECUTIVE COUNCILLOR ENCIK MOHAMAD ABU BAKAR BIN RAUTIN IBRAHIM WHO REPRESENTED THE KEDAH MENTERI BESAR AND HEADS OF FARMERS ASSOCIATIONS IN THE MUDA AREA OF KEDAH AND PERLIS.

(DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR SAID WATER WOULD STILL BE RELEASED INTO THE IRRIGATION CANALS DESPITE THE SUSPENSION OF THE OFF-SEASON PLANTING.

(THE WATER WAS FOR THE DAILY NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE, SUCH AS FOR DRINKING AND BATHING, AS IT WAS INSUFFICIENT FOR CULTIVATION OF PADI OR OTHER CROPS, HE SAID.

(IF THE WATER WAS USED FOR CROPS, THE CLEANLINESS OF WATER FOR DAILY NEEDS WOULD BE AFFECTED AND THE CROPS WOULD WILT DUE TO INSUFFICIENT SUPPLY, HE ADDED.

(CROP FAILURE BECAUSE OF INSUFFICIENT WATER COULD PROMPT THE FARMERS TO ASK FOR COMPENSATION, AND THIS MIGHT GIVE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ANTI-NATIONAL ELEMENTS TO BELITTLE THE GOVERNMENT, DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR SAID.

(ON WATER RATES OF THE FARMERS, HE SAID THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WOULD CONSIDER PROVIDING A 50 PER CENT SUBSIDY TO FARMERS THIS YEAR.

(A REFUND WOULD BE MADE TO FARMERS WHO HAD ALREADY PAID THE RATES. THE AVERAGE ANNUAL WATER RATES COLLECTED FROM FARMERS IN THE MUDA AREA IN KEDAH AND PERLIS AMOUNTED TO \$1.2 MILLION. THIS MEANT A GOVERNMENT SUBSIDY OF \$600,000 THIS YEAR, DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR SAID.

(ON THE \$6.3 MILLION COMPENSATION PROMISED BY THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, DATUK SHARIFF AHMAD, HE SAID IT WOULD ONLY BE PAID TO THE 20,500 TENANT FARMERS.

(HE SAID THE GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO COMPENSATE THE \$169 MILLION LOSS THAT WOULD BE INCURRED WITH THE SUSPENSION OF THE OFF-SEASON PLANTING.

(IT ONLY COMPENSATED A PERCENTAGE OF THE LOSSES AND NOT THE COST OF THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF PADI LOSS, HE POINTED OUT.

DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR, WHO RETURNED TO KUALA LUMPUR THIS AFTERNOON, HAD AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE AFFECTED AREAS AND THE MUDA DAM. —BERNAMA BS 1900/M