

PM suggests— forming 'padi estates'

PENANG, Mon. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today suggested to Balik Pulau padi farmers that they pool their land to form "padi estates" to be run along the lines of rubber estates.

This would overcome the problem of padi land idleness, he added. (Most padi plots are idle because farmers have abandoned them because of poor returns.)

He said such land could be managed like an industry by professional people and the land owners could become shareholders. The number of shares they would own would depend on the size of their land.

The Prime Minister made the suggestion after visiting a pilot project to rehabilitate neglected padi land in Sungai Burong here.

He told the farmers he was not implying that the Government was trying to acquire their land.

"They were only being asked to allow a company to manage their estates for them, he said.

"Once we have a company to manage the land, we won't need all the landowners to work in them anymore," he added.

He said plots of land should be "pooled together and managed by a body which would acquire experts and modern machinery."

He said if small plots were to be managed by individual farmers, they would fail; it would be unimaginable how they could get tractors to till their small fields.

He said there would not be a need to employ many workers in the padi estates.

In the United States, he said, one family could manage a farm of 5,000 acres and get attractive returns for it.

"Likewise in our fields, the fewer people employed, the better. The profits will be higher."

He said shareholder-landowners would not only get dividends but would also be paid salaries if they worked in the fields.

"Redundant labour could be channelled to alternative work," he said.

He also told padi farmers not to rely too much on government aid but to be independent.

He asked them not to assume that government subsidies were a source of wealth. Subsidies were only temporary aid, given to put the recipients on their feet, he said.

He said Penang had a lot of sources for wealth. During his half-hour helicopter ride over the island before meeting the farmers, he said, he saw patches of white sand said to be useless for planting. "But this land is of high value," he said. "It has a lot of silica for making glass. Our wealth is

just below our feet."

Whether a piece of land was suitable would depend on the farmers, he said. If not for padi, it could be suitable for something else, he said. It would be up to farmers to find out what would be suitable for their land.

He also urged the local people to exploit bamboo, now untouched. He said the Philippines could make millions of dollars from bamboo by being innovative.