

No plan to replace coconuts, says Dr M

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JOHORE BARU, Mon. — **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad** has assured farmers that the Government had no plan to replace coconut trees with other crops.

On the other hand, he called on the 100,000 coconut farmers to plant quality seedlings as this would help to improve their standard of living.

The Prime Minister gave this assurance during a 90-minute meeting last Friday with a delegation from the Rubber Smallholders Association led by its president, **Datuk Ahmad Arshad**.

According to **Datuk Ahmad**, **Dr Mahathir** stressed the need for transfer of technology to the farmers and called on them to diversify the coconut market.

He proposed that a factory be set up to process coconut milk for export as this would benefit farmers in the long run.

Datuk Ahmad said this was logical as the cooking oil

sector has become too competitive and coconut milk would open up a new field in the usage of coconuts.

Subsidies

He said this was one of the methods needed to improve the living conditions of coconut farmers, 80 per cent of whom were Malays, and was also in line with the national agriculture policy (NAP).

Many farmers had objected to the idea of replacing coconut with other crops as it would be against the wishes of their fore-fathers.

"The main worry of coconut farmers is the marketing aspect. A coconut may cost only 15 sen each in the kampung but it may fetch up to 70 sen each in towns.

"The association is trying to overcome this problem.

Another obstacle is the lack of labourers to pick the coconuts as youths have deserted their kampungs for the bright lights in towns," said **Datuk Ahmad**.

To tackle this problem, coconut farmers have begun contracting their picking and unhusking and all they had to do was to wait for their "fruits of labour".

Dr Mahathir, he added, also pledged that the Government would continue to give subsidies to farmers, especially padi farmers.

The Government, through the National Rice and Padi Board (LPN) would ensure that farmers really benefited from the scheme.

Datuk Ahmad said the delegation also told the Prime Minister that the association wanted representation in the various agriculture-based agencies to be increased from the current 20 per cent.

He said this would assist the Government in curbing abuse of powers among officers.