

Diversify crops, PM tells Felda

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KOTA TINGGI, Sat. — Felda will have to diversify crops in its schemes to ensure that income of its settlers is not affected in future, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The settlers should not become dependent on just one or two crops for their income.

At the moment, he said, Felda settlers were happily reaping profits from palm oil which still enjoyed a good market overseas.

"But this happy state of affairs will not last forever and we must, therefore, prepare ourselves with other alternatives," he said during a visit to the Felda Air Tawar Dua scheme near here.

It was the second day of his official visit to Johore.

He was accompanied by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, Johore Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ajib Ahmad and Land and Regional Development Minister Datuk Seri Adib Adam.

Dr Mahathir said Felda settlers should therefore plant crops other than rubber and oil palm so their incomes would not be drastically affected if the price of these crops fell and demand was reduced.

"We must remember what happened in the past when we concentrated on rubber. At

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that time, we thought there would always be a good market for our rubber products as, after all, the world would always need rubber for its automobile tyres.

"But, as soon as the price of our natural rubber went up, the world started looking for alternatives and came up with synthetic rubber, some of which were even better than our natural one.

Oil consumption

"We must remember that we are competing against countries and societies which utilise their advanced technical expertise all the time."

Dr Mahathir also reminded the people that oil-producing nations had wielded great power until recently.

The producers had thought that the world would not be able to do without oil but recent history had proved otherwise.

The world has managed to reduce its con-

sumption of oil and now there is an oil glut such that it is difficult to sell even at \$25 per barrel.

Dr Mahathir said landowners, including Felda settlers, should utilise their available land carefully and plant crops that could be used locally.

"This will enable us to consume our own products and therefore reduce dependence on imported stuff," he said.

The Prime Minister also said Felda needed to change its method of contracting out the initial work to clear its land schemes.

The settlers should be given the job of clearing land and setting up the basic structures for each scheme and they should be paid similar to the contractors and their workers.

In this way, whatever profits accruing from the initial works would still be derived by the settlers themselves. Felda too would benefit by cutting the expenditure on the opening of its new schemes.

Dr Mahathir later opened the primary, secondary and religious schools of the scheme.

He also officially opened a petrol kiosk and a mini-market owned by the Felda Air Tawar Dua business group.