

Dr M: We want to help Penans

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By James Ritchie

KUCHING, Fri. — It is not the intention of Malaysia that the nomadic Penans be turned into "human zoological specimens" to be gawked at by tourists, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"They are Malaysian citizens who deserve a chance to progress," he said at the opening of the Asean-EC meeting at the State Civic Centre, attended by about 1,000 people.

"There is nothing romantic about these helpless, half-starved and disease-ridden people and we make no apologies for endeavouring to uplift their living conditions.

"It is our policy to even-

tually bring all jungle dwellers into the mainstream of the nation's life."

He said the majority of Sarawak's 9,000 Penans had successfully settled in longhouses, leaving only about 900 who are still leading a nomadic life.

Dr Mahathir viewed with concern the anti-logging campaign, which is now being waged against Malaysia, resulting in the boycott of tropical timber in some European Community countries.

"We recognise that there are many organisations, groups and individuals who are genuinely concerned about the environment. However, there are those who are bent on carrying out their campaigns based on sentiments and irrationality.

"And when they have the ears of political parties either in power or in the Opposition, biased policies emerge. Action is taken against us not because it is deemed right, but because it is popular. While this may be a vote-catching issue for some, for us in the developing countries, it is a matter of economic survival."

Malaysia's timber industry gave direct employment to 162,000 people and constituted 5.1 per cent of Malaysia's total export earnings, he said.

He added that there was every indication that the timber industry was poised to make a bigger contribution to Malaysia's economy, particularly value-added products such as furniture.

He said industrialised countries could assist Malaysia in the attempt to move downstream by lowering their protective walls, now in place against such manufactured products.

"The tariff barriers in some countries now favour sawn timber and logs against finished higher value products. The irony is that this not only retards our industrialisation process, but it also encourages more trees to be felled."

Dr Mahathir also feared that a boycott of tropical timber might result in the clearing of more forest land for agriculture and land development because Sarawak depended on earnings from timber activities.