

Dr M: We'll do our part for environment

PETALING JAYA, Tues. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad declared today that Malaysia is ready to play its part to preserve biodiversity.

But the Prime Minister reminded developed countries of the massive cost of doing this.

As an example of Malaysia's concern with preserving the environment, he cited the decision to scrap the Bakun dam project, which he said would have reduced sharply electricity costs.

"This is a sacrifice that Malaysia has made. We hope it is appreciated that we are doing our bit, at a heavy price, for the environment," he added.

Dr Mahathir was open-

ing the five-day International Conference on Conservation of Tropical Biodiversity here.

He said that Malaysia had only used a small portion of its resources although it was endowed with great diversity of species in its forests and other natural habitats such as rivers, lakes and surrounding seas.

He said that maintaining global biodiversity would benefit all, especially developed countries, with their technological and scientific capability.

Thus, this effort must be well supported by the developed countries without imposing restrictive burdens on developing na-

tions, Dr Mahathir said.

"While we would not wish to destroy biodiversity, it must be remembered that preserving it imposes a massive cost on the already poor," he said.

The Prime Minister said that a way must be found to preserve biodiversity without bringing development in poor countries to a standstill.

"It is difficult to convince a man who is about to be eaten by a tiger or trampled by an elephant or dying of typhus or malaria that he is helping to preserve biodiversity," he said.

"Malaysia, for example, is prepared to reforge the Bakun dam project for the sake of environment

although the project would have been able to supply cheap electricity."

It was reported that the proposed \$12 billion dam project would have been able to supply 3,000 megawatt of electricity, the amount being used by Malaysia now.

Reports had said the project would have also supplied electricity to Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and Thailand, but was called off after protests from several environmentalist groups, which feared that the dam in Sarawak would damage the area.

Dr Mahathir said the country was prepared to scrap the project although it would have re-

duce the cost of electricity to one sen per unit.

"The decision to scrap the project meant that the people had to continue paying electricity at a rate of between 17 and 24 sen a unit," he added.

The Prime Minister said the people and nation were paying a high cost for the decision because Malaysia was not a rich country.

Dr Mahathir told newsmen later that the decision was Malaysia's contribution to global environment conservation.

"Other countries, especially developed nations, must appreciate Malaysia's move by not taking actions that would put the country at a loss," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it would not be possible to find an alternative to replace the Bakun project.

"The potential for hydro-electricity generation in Sarawak was 80,000 megawatt — enough to meet Britain's needs," he said.

He said the nation now had to rely on fuel, gas and oil to run its generators but the cost was high, and it also affected the environment.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had established forest plantations to reduce exploitation.

"A total of 1.485 million hectares have been set aside as parks, wildlife re-

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serves and sanctuaries," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the six per cent of Peninsular Malaysia's forest reserves represented one of the highest of such percentages in this part of the world.

"This figure compares well with or even exceeds that of some developed countries of the western world, many of which are quite vocal on the subject of conservation," he said.

He urged developed nations, with vast unpopulated and unused land, to play a bigger role in preserving biodiversity.

"The deserts of the western United States can in part at least be grown with trees using the vast

resources of underground water. Some of the flora and fauna can be transferred to these new forests," he said.

Dr Mahathir said developed nations could also easily reforest large parts of the Sahara and the sub-Saharan areas where the poorest people in the world are dying by the thousands every day from lack of food.

"Let us not trot out the spurious argument that deserts are essential for biodiversity and must remain untouched by the hands of man," he added.

The Prime Minister said he was not being facetious in suggesting that some of the deserts in some developed countries be converted to forests.

"Quite a substantial

area of deserts have been developed as resort cities complete with vast golf courses and artificial lakes on which stand luxury hotels," he said.

On Malaysia's effort in environment conservation, he said the nation had a long and mature history of managing conservation areas.

"Taman Negara, for example, created in 1939, was the first National Park in South-East Asia to meet today's international criteria for a national park," he added.

Dr Mahathir said the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment, which he presented during the Commonwealth summit here last year, also marked a new level of understanding on keeping

the Earth clean and preserving it for future generations.

He also said permanent forest estate in the coun-

try totalled 12.74 million hectares, of which about 29 per cent were protected or maintained as amenity forests.