

PM: Label food to protect consumers

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By Nuraina Samad

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — Food labelling should be done in the public interest and not for economic or business reasons, **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad** said today.

The Prime Minister cited the label "no tropical oil" on food-stuff in certain developed countries as an example of labelling for economic purposes.

He said it was not being done as a food safety barrier because other developed countries were not known to exercise such control.

"There is no proof that tropical oil is harmful. They regard tropical oil to be so and to be the cause of heart disease. But the consumption of palm oil in that country is too small for it to be the cause of such diseases among the population," he told a Press conference after opening the six-day First Asian Conference on Food Safety at the Shangri-La Hotel.

Dr Mahathir, elaborating on certain points he made when opening the conference, said there should be one safety **standard** for food for the whole world as everyone should be protected from consuming food that was harmful.

"The problem we have now is that food safety standards differ ... **while** one country is

ready to accept a certain standard, others impose higher standards. Sometimes the safety standards have nothing at all to do with ensuring that food **is** safe."

The labelling of food for economic and specifically for business interest is **an** abuse of the laws on labelling, he said.

Earlier, opening the conference, Dr Mahathir said the labelling of food, like "no tropical oil" in developed countries, would not only mislead consumers but question the role of food control authorities in those countries.

He said ingredient labelling, required by law, was meant to inform consumers and not to deceive them.

About **400** local and international participants are attending the seminar.

On public awareness, Dr Mahathir said it was important for both scientists and journalists to make food issues clear to the public.

In the final analysis, the language used to instil food safety awareness among the public must be non-scientific and accurate, he said.

As for the mass media, the Prime Minister said they should be more **responsible** in their reporting **and** not cause alarm with their "media outbreak".

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia gave priority to the importance

of safe food but added that this did not mean it had overcome the problems associated with food which was not safe for consumption.

He said the country was committed to doing everything possible to prevent tragic incidents like the one in 1933 in which 13 children died.

Dr Mahathir said given the scarcity of world resources, priority must be given to the never-ending process of improving the provision of basic human needs and economic infrastructure.

He said the safety of food was a complex issue which affected health authorities, producers and consumers.

The failure to comply with food safety standards around the world had resulted in deaths of many innocent victims, losses to food companies in terms of closures, loss of consumer confidence, **hospitalisation** and compensation.

Dr Mahathir said that for this reason, developing countries had to collectively overcome the many constraints facing them by having adequate and effective laws and regulations, which needed to be constantly updated to keep pace with changes in social structures, food habits, modern agriculture and food technology.

He said there was a need for proper infrastructure and basic

laboratory facilities to be provided and for inspection services to be upgraded.

Besides this, he added, international co-operation was vital for the training of human resources to ensure that the implementation of safety standards was effective.

Dr Mahathir said there must be community awareness of issues on food safety which must be integrated into primary health care systems.

Consumers, he added, had a key role to play in ensuring food safety as their increased knowledge and awareness could help them protect themselves and their families.

The conference is jointly organised by the World **Health Organisation**, Health Ministry, Malaysian **Institut** of Food Technology, the Washington-based **International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI)** and the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development, in co-operation with the Federation of the Institutes of Food Science and Technology in **Asean**, the Food and Agricultural **Organisation** of the United Nations, ILSI Australia and the **International Union of Food Science and Technology**.

More than 42 working papers are being presented by delegates from Asia and the **Pacific** region, **Switzerland** and the **United States**.