

Dr M: Penans can choose lifestyle

From K. Bala

RIO DE JANEIRO, Sun. — The Penans have a right to choose their way of life—whether to live in the urban or semi-urban areas or in the jungle, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed said.

He said that if the Penans wanted to go back to the jungle, there was plenty of forests for them.

Dr Mahathir was responding to questions on the Penan and logging issue in Sarawak at a Press conference here yesterday attended by the international media, Malaysian journalists and several Non-Governmental Organisations' (NGOs) representatives.

He said the 10,000 Penans, of whom 1,000 were still living in jungles, were people like anyone else and had a right to development.

"Maybe they do not know what development or education is but they must be exposed," he said.

He said that with 50 per cent of Malaysia's land under forests they would have no problem living in the jungle if they wanted to.

Dr Mahathir was responding to questions that the Penans' way of life was being affected by logging.

"In fact, they have problems hunting for food in the jungle occasionally," he said, adding that if they chose to live outside the jungle they would have no problem getting jobs as the country had good employment opportunities.

He said Malaysia practised controlled logging and not "clean clearing" as practised in the West.

If there was clean clearing it was for development projects like housing and opening of land schemes for the benefit of the people.

He said that in certain

cases the Penans might not be able to go back to their original jungles if they had already been logged.

To a question that by not being able to return to their original forests it was similar to asking the people in this city to go to Jakarta or Singapore, Dr Mahathir quipped:

"There are people who settle in Australia, America and Latin America who go back to Europe. We will go back to the original jungle, but you must move first."

Dr Mahathir said many people in the West did not want to talk about the destruction caused by shifting cultivation by those who lived in the jungle as it was not popular.

On the rationale behind the sale of timber from controlled logging, he said foreign exchange was needed for development.

"In fact Japan buys more logs from the United States and Canada than from Malaysia," he added.

Meanwhile, US President

George Bush has made it clear that there will be no sharing of wealth between owners of genes bank from the South and those who produce something from the genes.

"It seems that he feels he has to protect the intellectual properties and patent rights of his people," Dr Mahathir told a Press conference here yesterday when asked to comment on the views expressed by President Bush during his address at the Earth summit.

Dr Mahathir added that the protection of the patent rights seemed to be more important to Bush even if it meant taking the resources from a poor country.

The Prime Minister cited an example of the development of certain drugs derived from genes in Madagascar without it benefiting in any way.

On the announcement by Japan at the conference here yesterday that it would increase aid by 50 per cent to the South for environment projects, the Prime Minister said it was a positive move.

Japan, he said, was one of the few developed countries which was meeting the 0.7 gross national product target set by the UN to help poor nations.

Asked whether Japan should have taken the lead at the conference, Dr Mahathir said since some developed countries did not want to lead, Japan should have taken the opportunity to do so.

On the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Dr Mahathir said the talks should have ended with benefit to all nations, particularly developing countries. However, certain countries of the North refused to accept what was right as they only considered their own interests.