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Mahathir-Timber

MONEY OFFERED TO STOP MALAYSIAN LOGGERS IN SOUTH SEAS, SAYS PM

LANGKAWI, Aug 25 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today some regional powers were offering money to persuade developing countries in the South Seas and other regions to stop the logging operations of Malaysian and other Asean companies.

"We do not know what to call such aid, but it is questionable whether ecology has anything to do with it," he said when opening a meeting of Asean ministers of agriculture and forestry here.

He said Asean timber companies had been careful not to destroy the forests they logged in the South Seas and other regions.

"Unfortunately, the activities of Asean loggers to help the economy of many developing countries have aroused resentment in some regional powers.

"Suddenly, money was offered to these developing countries to persuade them to stop Malaysian and other investors," he said.

The Prime Minister said when the need to conserve the world's forests was first recognised, the focus was almost exclusively on the tropical forest and its exploitation. -- more

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He said a full-scale and emotive campaign was mounted in the West to ban the use of tropical hardwoods as if temperate land timber had no role at all in maintaining the ecological balance.

The timber tycoons of the North could clear-fell millions of hectares of forest with impunity, he said.

"While we are not denying the role played by tropical forests in sustaining the ecological balance, we would like to point out that we do not clear felling. Extraction of timber is controlled," he said.

He said Asean remains a major tropical forest region with some 180 million hectares which represent about 60 per cent of the Asean land area.

He also said the private sector of Asean countries could play a major role to enhance intra-Asean investment in the agriculture and forestry sector so as to exploit the complementarity within Asean in terms of factor endowments, labour costs, technologies and skills.

"Asean private initiatives should aim at strategic alliances and joint ventures in the production, processing and marketing of agricultural products. The thrust of cooperative efforts in this direction should result in penetration of extra-Asean markets," he said. -- more

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Dr Mahathir said with the conclusion of the GATT negotiations, there would be more trade and competition, and competitiveness would be the key to survival in the world marketplace.

"All the comparative advantages of the Asean member countries should be combined in order for Asean to be a low cost producer and exporter of quality agricultural products," he said.

He also urged the private sector of Asean countries to initiate projects which would help expedite the process of opening up the growth centres being set up under the Growth Triangle development strategies involving all Asean member countries.

The growth triangles are between Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (IMP-GT); between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (SIJORT); and between Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (BIMP-GT).

The meeting is attended by Agriculture Minister Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, Asean secretary-general Datuk Ajit Singh, Brunei Minister of Industry and Primary Resources Pehin Datuk Abdul Rahman Taib, Indonesian Minister of Agriculture Dr Sjarifudin Baharsjah, Thai Deputy Minister of Cooperative Suthep Taugsuban, Singapore Senior Parliamentary Secretary Matthias Yao and Philippine Secretary of Agriculture Roberto S. Sebastian. -- Bernama

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