

Dr M: Certain rich countries using money to stop logging

LANGKAWI, Thurs. — Certain developed countries are offering money to persuade developing nations in the South Seas and other regions to stop logging operations of Malaysian investors and those from other Asean companies.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he did not know what to call such aid but it was questionable whether ecology had anything to do with it.

Dr Mahathir said when Asean timber companies expanded their operations to the South Seas and other regions, they were careful not to destroy the environment.

"Unfortunately, the activities of Asean loggers to help the economy of developing countries have raised resentment among some regional powers," he said at the opening of the 16th Asean Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry meeting at Langkawi Island Resort here.

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

Also present were Agriculture Minister Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Kheng Yaik, Asean secretary-general Datuk Ajit Singh, Brunei, Industry and Primary Resources Minister Datuk Abdul Rahman Taib, Indonesian Agriculture Minister Dr Sjaifudin Baharsjah, Thailand Deputy Agriculture Cooperative Minister Suthep Thaugsuban and Singapore Senior Parliamentary Secretary of the National Development Ministry Matthias Yao.

Dr Mahathir said while many Asean countries could afford to reduce dependence on forests for their development, other countries may not be able to do so.

He said these countries had a right to extract their forest products in order to free themselves from others.

"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."

He said extraction of tim-

ber in Asean countries was controlled.

Dr Mahathir noted that Asean remained a major tropical forest region with some 180 million hectares and was the most important supplier of tropical timber products in the world, accounting for 80 per cent of the international trade.

He said forestry had played a dominant role in the socio-economic development of the region.

"You may recall that when the need to conserve the world's forests was first recognised, the focus was almost exclusively on the tropical forest and its exploitation.

"A full-scale and emotive campaign was mounted in the West to ban the use of tropical hardwoods.

"It would seem that temperate land timber has no role at all to play in maintaining the ecological balance."

The timber tycoons of the north could clear-fell millions of hectare of forest impunity, he said.

Dr Mahathir also spoke on the role of private sector to enhance intra-Asean investment in agriculture and forestry industries.

He said Asean private initiatives should aim at strategic alliances and joint ventures in the production, processing and marketing of agricultural products.

The thrust of efforts in this direction should result in penetration of extra Asean markets.

"With the conclusion of the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade negotiations, there will be more trade and competition, and competitiveness will be the key to survival in the world market place.

"Hence all 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 added.

Dr Mahathir also urged the private sector to initiate projects which would benefit all parties and help expedite the process of opening up growth centres like the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle, Singapore-Johor-Rhiau growth triangle and the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines growth triangle.