

Targeting only tropical timber is unj

Forests: Call for

By S. Jayakrishnan and Angela Rao

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said tropical forests should not be singled out for the ills of environmental degradation worldwide as such selectivity was unjustified.

"Actions on all types of forest should be considered if indeed deforestation is a cause of major global environmental problems.

"Tropical forest bashing is seen as the panacea for the ills of environmental degradation worldwide.

"In any case, Malaysia values her forests beyond the benefits of commercial logging and is fully aware of the significant ecological and environmental protective role of our forests," the Prime Minister said.

He said since the Rio Earth Summit, Malaysia had taken the lead to promote discussions on forest issues based on a proper perspective.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the opening of the Malaysian International Furniture Fair at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

Also present were Minister of Primary Industries Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, his deputy, Tengku Datuk Mahmud Mansor, the ministry's secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah and Oh Han Cheng, the acting president of the Malaysian Furniture Industry Council.

The co-organisers of the fair, which showcases the products of 280 local furniture manufacturers, are the Malaysian Furniture Industry Council and the Malaysian Timber Industry Board.

The fair has attracted 600 foreign buyers from as far as the United States, Taiwan, Korea and West Asia.

Dr Mahathir said little had been highlighted of the fact that forests and tree crops cover some 23.6 million hectares or 72 per cent of Malaysia's total land area.

Dr Mahathir added that of Malaysia's permanent forest estates of some 14 million hectares, production forests of approximately 10.67 million hectares are managed to ensure that tim-

ber production is done on a sustainable basis.

"The many facets of tropical forest management are least understood by critics who have not even set foot in our country and yet never fail to amplify shortcomings which appear to be not in keeping with environmental concerns.

"Malaysia has pledged that at least half of the country would remain forever green.

"Yet it has called for the greening of only 30 per cent of the other countries, a percentage which the developed countries with their excessive farming can well afford."

Dr Mahathir said since Independence, Malaysia had gone through a few decades of exporting primary processed timber and that it might not be to the country's best interests in the context of current sentiments and concern about the environment and sustainable development to be literally only the "hewers of wood".

"The active campaigning against the use of tropical timbers has led to discriminatory and unfair unilateral legislative actions and boycotts against the use of tropical timber."

Dr Mahathir said even though various actions had been taken to counter these negative attitudes, the industry together with the authorities, had to ensure that our forests are truly sustainable.

"It is in our interest to ensure a sustainable supply source for what has become a major sector in our economy."

He said new strategies for the development of value-added processing industries which could maintain or even increase the contribution of the forest sector to the national economy must be pursued.

Dr Mahathir said it was significant that furniture was the focus of one of the first ever international trade fairs in Malaysia.

In 1994 the forest sector was the most important foreign exchange earner among Malaysia's commodities with estimated export

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global action

Give emphasis to design, says Dr M

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of forestry products at RM12.9 billion (about US\$5 billion), accounting for 8.7 per cent of total foreign exchange earnings.

Dr Mahathir said this exceeded even the earnings of the petroleum and gas sector.

He added that furniture exports in particular, have achieved remarkable increases and had joined the ranks of the billion-ringgit-earners two years ago.

Dr Mahathir said to further enhance Malaysia's competitive edge in furniture exports and to add more value to its products, due emphasis must be given to design.

He said the country's cosmopolitan heritage should enable it to be more innovative in the global marketplace where numerous cultural and economic

variables determine market demand.

"Success in the international furniture market demands that we fully harness the technological skills, modern management and the essential arts in furniture design."

Dr Mahathir said unlike selling products domestically, the international market called for creativity, appropriate designs, high quality and competitive products, bearing in mind that serving the customer was of utmost importance.

He added that the ability to create new designs was an essential prerequisite in Malaysia's progress towards becoming an industrialised nation and in the evolution and growth of the furniture industry, original and attractive designs were important.

Dr Mahathir said efforts should be made to strive for

a unique "Malaysia furniture design" with which buyers could identify with and manufacturers must consider this role seriously.

He added that he was convinced that the country has the prerequisites to make the furniture sector an export-oriented industry of a much larger scale and of world-class standing.

However, achieving this aspiration calls for bold investment not only in manufacturing capacity, but also in terms of upstream linkages of raw material supply.

"Investments in rubber plantations which produce both latex and material for furniture making should be pursued in earnest.

"Entrepreneurs in this field can certainly reap the fruits of their ventures in the years to come. Malaysia, which has a lead in research and development in the planting of rubber, would

benefit from such efforts and thus be able to stay ahead of the competition from newcomers."

Dr Mahathir said one area he would like to stress upon was the quality of the finish and added that Malaysian manufacturers must put in more effort in order to achieve the kind of velvety finish typical of Scandinavian furniture and the use of lacquer so as to get a high gloss finish. He said far too often Malaysian furniture makers were too stingy in their use of lacquer.

Dr Mahathir also presented prizes to the winners of the National Furniture Design Competition 1994. Nor Azizi Ahmad and Saw Quee Jade won the MTIB Furniture Design Silver Award, while Ang Kooi Ling and Husaini Ismail the MTIB Furniture Design Bronze Award. The fair is on until March 12.