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'Boycott will cause forests to be cleared for agriculture'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Producer countries will be in a better position to undertake sustainable management of their forests if major developed consumer markets provide greater access and higher value to timber products.

However, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia was against unilateral action taken by the major markets to restrict or boycott the use of tropical timber.

Such actions, he added, would only render the forests useless as a source of income and cause the forests to be cleared for agricultural and other purposes.

"In short, restriction on trade in timber products will not help to reduce deforestation in the developing countries," Dr Mahathir said when opening the International Timber Conference 1998 today.

Also present were Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and his deputy Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein.

For sustainable forest management, the Prime Minister said countries would have to forego potential wealth and plough back considerable resources into the forestry sector.

"Poor countries cannot be expected to do this unassisted. Besides, if they are providing a carbon sink for the world, including for the rich countries, it is only right that there should be cost sharing between them and the rich countries."

The Prime Minister said the situation had become even more necessary as some of these countries had been made poorer through the activities of traders from rich countries.

He added Malaysia had established its own fund for the purpose of carrying out activities related to sustainable forest management but the campaign against tropical forest was depriving the country of revenue needed to sustain the fund.

"In this regard, I would like to urge the developed countries to re-affirm and put into action the commitments to provide concrete assistance to developing countries to achieve sustainable management of their forest resources."

In addition, sustainable forest management should be promoted through mutually supportive trade and environmental policies.

"Malaysia is convinced that an international forest convention will provide the necessary legal framework for ensuring an equitable, transparent and comprehensive mechanism that balances sustainable forest management, biodiversity and economic growth."

The Prime Minister also said such a convention could remedy the problems of legal uncertainty and lack of predictability currently faced in international regulation of global forestry.

"We accept that forests are no longer just a source of timber. They also play an important role in regulating the climate and in the absorption of carbon dioxide and other wastes.

"They are also a source of biodiversity and contribute towards medicinal values."

Hence, Dr Mahathir added that the greatest challenge in the next century would be to strike a balance between the need to conserve forests for environmental protection and biodiversity, while trying to meet the need for living space as well as timber as a source of income for poor

countries.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia was one of the strong proponents of a more open economy and greater cross-border flow of capital and trade.

However, he added that cross border flows, liberalisation and globalisation should contribute towards equitable distribution of wealth for all.

Dr Mahathir said developed countries should allow more room for the developing countries to adjust themselves and to pursue national goals effectively before forcing upon them liberalisation measures which they are not yet prepared for.

"I am glad to note that the initiatives undertaken at the Asean, World Trade Organisation and Asia Pacific Economic Corporation meetings have led to the dismantling of tariff barriers for timber products."

However, he said the recent forced lifting of restrictions on the export of unprocessed timber in order to liberalise trade had resulted in reduced incomes for timber exporting countries.

"Impoverishing countries through certain means also have the effect of forcing them to export unprocessed, low value-added timber in order to earn foreign exchange."

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