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Food import bill `can be cut by 30pc'

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JOHOR BARU, Sun. - The Agriculture Ministry is hopeful that the country's food import bill can be reduced by as much as 30 per cent by 2000.

Deputy Agriculture Minister Datuk Tengku Mahmud Mansor said this was based on the encouraging response to the various food production programmes, particularly, the integrated farming of cattle in oil palm plantations.

Last year, Malaysia's food import bill totalled RM11.4 billion, with beef, fish, vegetables and fruits topping the list.

After opening the Johor Baru South Area Farmers' Organisation today, Tengku Mahmud said State Governments had responded well to the call to allocate land for agricultural activities. He identified these states as Johor, Pahang, Perak, Terengganu, Negri Sembilan, Perlis, Kedah and Malacca.

"I am sure the results of the campaign (to boost food production) will be seen in 2000. I hope it will be able to increase export," he said.

He added State Governments should allocate land for agriculture projects on a lease basis rather than granting titles to avoid the land from being used for other commercial projects.

Tengku Mahmud also said his ministry officials were continuing discussions on ways to boost agriculture output.

He added the Ministry was also working out means to disburse the RM300 million recently injected by the Government into the fund for food, or 3F scheme. The sum was specially allocated for small farmers including Area Farmers' Organisations.

He said the disbursement would prioritise cattle, poultry, fish and vegetable farming.

Opening the annual general meeting earlier, Tengku Mahmud said the economic situation had provided an opportunity to revive the farmers' movement as the Government was giving the agriculture sector much emphasis.

He said farmers and area farmers' organisations needed to strengthen their marketing network.

"Farmers must involve themselves in marketing their produce without middlemen. This way, they will get better prices while allowing consumers to pay less."

Towards this aim, Tengku Mahmud said the Ministry had directed the Federal Agriculture Marketing Authority to increase the number of pasar tani or expand existing ones.

"We will ask State Governments to provide areas for pasar tani. We hope the Farmers' Organisation Authority could also arrange for more farmers' markets."

"We have given instruction that prices at the pasar tani or pasar peladang should be 20 per cent or even 30 per cent lower than prices in conventional markets," he added.

In Malacca, Tengku Mahmud said the ministry was confident the country could become a major producer of halal beef products by 2000, if farmers engage in integrated farming schemes.

Though it was initially targeted for 2005, the Ministry is confident that it can be achieved within two years.

"This finding is based on the promising results of the integrated farming scheme launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad

in Johor last month."

"If cattle breeders adopt such methods in palm oil estates, the country could be among the major producer of halal meat," he said.

Tengku Mahmud said this after launching a seminar entitled "Opportunities and Challenges towards Youth in the Malacca's Agricultural Sector" late yesterday evening.

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