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Mahathir-Timber

MALAYSIA AGAINST UNILATERAL ACTIONS TO RESTRICT USE OF TROPICAL TIMBER

KUALA LUMPUR, March 5 (Bernama) -- Malaysia is against unilateral actions taken by the major developed consumer markets to restrict or boycott the use of tropical timber, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said such actions only render the forests valueless as a source of income and consequently the forests were being cleared for agricultural and other purposes.

Reaffirming Malaysia's support to globalisation and greater liberalisation in trade and investment both at regional as well as international level, he said no money would be spent on preserving the forests.

"In short restrictions on trade in timber products will not help to reduce deforestation in the developing countries.

"In fact if efforts are taken by the major markets to provide greater market access and higher value to timber products, producer countries would be in a better position to undertake sustainable management of their forests," he said when opening the International Timber Conference 1998 here.

Dr Mahathir said the global trade in forest products is estimated at US\$114 billion and continues to increase in volume with developed countries dominating this trade, accounting for about 80 per cent of the timber trade.

"The developing countries have entered this field but their share of the trade is still small," he said.

The prime minister said there was a need for the appropriate global policies to be put in place to ensure fair and equitable international trading practices and market access particularly for timber products.

He said Malaysia believes that cross-border flows, liberalisation and globalisation should contribute toward equitable distribution of wealth for all.

"Unilateral actions to achieve these objectives are not likely to benefit anyone else other the party concerned," he said.

In welcoming the decision taken at the last Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum meeting in Vancouver to endorse the selection of products, including the forest products sector for early trade liberalisation measures, he said this would provide increased market access, particularly for products from the developing countries in Apec.

In this regard, he 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 were not prepared for as yet.

Dr Mahathir also said that the recent forced lifting of restrictions on the export of unprocessed timber in order to liberalise trade has resulted in the erosion of 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 much-needed foreign exchange," he said.

Dr Mahathir also expressed disappointment over accusations that Malaysian companies were "environmental marauders" even when they have not even ventured into certain countries.

"That Malaysia today still has 50 per cent forest cover bears testimony

to the efficiency and care of Malaysian timber companies when extracting timber. By contrast, certain countries which have become developed have lost almost all their forest cover," he said.

The prime minister also urged the developed countries to reaffirm and put into action their commitments to provide new additional financial resources and environmentally-sound technology transfer to developing countries for the management of their forest resources made at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and post-UNCED.

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

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia remains convinced that an international forest convention would provide the necessary legal framework for ensuring an equitable, transparent and comprehensive mechanism that balances sustainable forest management, biodiversity and economic growth.

"Such a convention can remedy the problems of legal uncertainty and lack of predictability currently faced in international regulation of global forestry," he added. -- BERNAMA

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