

16 DEC 1998

Feature-Rubber

"RUBBER CITY" TO PUT THE BOUNCE BACK INTO THE INDUSTRY

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KUALA LUMPUR: A new township is waiting for the right economic weather and condition to sprout up in Sungai Buloh as a direct tribute to rubber, the commodity that has been the engine of growth of the country for the last 100 years or so.

At the same time, the township, to be known as "Rubber City" is to act as the catalyst for the development of rubber technology and the industry.

The township, with a taste of the raw old days of rubber and the latest in technology, is to provide the environment for scientists and researchers to harness the latest technology to find more and better uses of rubber, while nurturing more productive strains of the tree that had migrated here from Brazil.

Though not as spectacular as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) some 60km to the south, Rubber City would be just as amazing in that the rubber industry is still an integral part of life in the country.

When announcing the proposed project at a function in August 1996, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said the township would be built on a 400-hectare site of the Rubber Research Institute (RRI) at a cost of RM3 billion to RM4 billion over a period of five to 10 years.

Apart from the latest lab for rubber research and development, the city would house an experimental station, an international exhibition centre for rubber products, a rubber technology centre, housing and commercial centre.

There would also be a Rubber Information Centre, while the headquarters of the Malaysian Rubber Board now in Jalan Ampang, would occupy its pride of place within the city.

Director-General of the board, Datuk Dr Abdul Aziz S.A Kadir, said the modern township in the midst of a rubber estate would take a couple of years to be a reality.

Now being studied by the Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department, its results would be known shortly since the country's economy is recovering.

He said the project was supposed to have taken off ground but it became a victim of the economic downturn since July last year.

Whatever it is, Dr Abdul Aziz said, the "Rubber City" with its modern and traditional features, would become a reality given the fast development of the industry and the many uses of the commodity.

Dr Abdul Aziz said the township was intended to be a symbol of the important role played by rubber in the economic advancement of the nation since independence.

It may also evoke a nostalgia for the days when rubber was "king" in the country's economic life, Malaysia then being the world's largest rubber producer. Today, the country is in third place, after Thailand and Indonesia, respectively.

He said he hoped "Rubber City" would open the eyes and mind of the people to the fact that the nation still needs the revenue from rubber and that the industry needs more sophisticated management and not depend solely on rubber gloves, which are behind time.

These facts had to be made expressedly clear because, he said, there are smallholders and tappers who have the misconception that rubber is no longer important and they could tap their trees only when they have no other option.

Dr Abdul Aziz said the city is in line with the aspiration of the Prime

Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who wanted the consultants, engineers and architects in rubber technology to have the widest exposure so that they could come out with new and epoch-making rubber products with their own brand names.

The prime minister when launching the International Rubber Products Exhibition Centre in Sungai Buluh last year had said that it was now time for the nation to make a name for itself in producing goods from natural rubber.

The irony is that while the country exports a lot of rubber, it has to import back rubber products worth RM600 million a year.

Dr Abdul Aziz noted that natural rubber is used in about 10,000 products but only a small number is made in the country under their own brand names.

He said Malaysia's contribution to the international rubber industry is well recognised. For example, RRI recently won the "Nikkei Asia" award of Japan for the rubber technological innovation category which benefits not just the nation but also the international community.

Head of the Public Affairs Publication and Library of the board, Dr Othman Hashim, said the creation of rubber city is most apt to rekindle the interest and confidence of the people in the crop which was first introduced through a few seedlings from Brazil some 150 years ago.

"Apart from being an international research centre, it could at least enable urban kids to know the trees directly and not through pictures or TV," he said.

He said in contrast to declining production, statistics showed that usage of natural rubber in the country has increased. For example, in 1997 the domestic rubber industry used 361,188 tonnes compared with 307,750 tonnes in 1995.

In 1997, export of raw natural rubber amounted to RM3.02 billion, rubber products RM4.65 billion and rubber wood, RM1.71 billion. Together, they accounted for 6.7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GNP).

Dr Othman said revenue from rubber export would be encouraging, if not for the falling prices since 1995 to around RM2.70 per kilogramme.

The country has presently 1.6 million hectares of the crop, of which 85 percent or 1.4 million hectares are smallholding.

"So long as the price remains weak, it is quite difficult especially for smallholders to continue tapping, even with modern technology," he said.

The president of the national association of rubber smallholders (PKPKM) Datuk Ahmad Arshad meanwhile said he is impressed with the proposed city because of its components like its research and development centre, and international exhibition centre.

Expressing his confidence that it would go to benefit the smallholders, he said it would also be a symbol of the development of the industry in the country. -- Bernama

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