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Trade restrictions will destroy, not save, forests: PM

RESTRICTIONS on trade in timber products, rather than advancing the cause of preserving the forests, are counter-productive, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

"The worst thing to do if we want to minimise timber extraction is to impoverish timber-producing countries," he said in his keynote address at the 1998 International Timber Conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

If every tree is made to yield maximum returns through better prices for timber, lower cost of extraction and higher value-added production, fewer trees will be felled and forest destruction reduced.

"Then countries, which depend on timber for their economic development, need not extract timber in an unsustainable way," Dr Mahathir said. In addition, money will be available for preserving the forests.

Unilateral actions taken by major developed consumer markets to restrict or boycott the use of tropical timber will only serve to render the forests valueless as a source of income. Consequently, they will be cleared for agricultural and other purposes.

There is therefore a need for appropriate global policies to promote fair and equitable international trade in timber products so that forest resources could be utilised on a sustainable basis, he said.

In stressing that Malaysia remains committed to trade and investment liberalisation, Dr Mahathir welcomed the decision taken at the last Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Vancouver to endorse the selection of products, including those that are forest resource-based, for early trade liberalisation.

The Prime Minister urged the global community to show their commitment towards safeguarding the important heritage by accelerating regional and international cooperation in matters related to sustainable forest management and development.

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

"This has become even more necessary as some of these countries have been made poorer through the activities of rich (currency) traders from the rich countries," he added.

The global trade in forest products is estimated at US\$114 billion (US\$1 = RM3.93) and is dominated by the developed countries which account for about 80 per cent of the total trade.

Dr Mahathir also expressed disappointment over accusations that Malaysian companies were "environmental marauders", some in countries which they do not even have operations.

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

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