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BUDGET-AGRICULTURE

AGRICULTURE MAY SEE MORE INCENTIVES IN BUDGET 2000

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KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 26 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent remarks on turning Malaysia into a big food producer appear to have given a wake-up call towards rebuilding the nation's agriculture sector.

What can Budget 2000 offer in terms of incentives and measures to help realise the prime minister's vision as well as improve the country's food production capacity?

"I am positive that the government will give more incentives (for agriculture). I'm positive of Mahathir's vision," said Kerk Loong Sing, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry of Kuala Lumpur & Selangor's chairman of agriculture committee.

"Since the government wants to develop agriculture, it will look at all avenues to help farmers and agricultural practitioners," he said when asked for comments on how the sector could be revitalised.

Agriculture, particularly food production, had taken a back seat of late but the recent economic crisis had taught some valuable lessons and prompted serious consideration on rectifying the situation.

And why not? The country's food import bill runs to a whopping RM10 billion annually.

Kerk said although the government had made a lot of efforts to help the agriculture sector, there was still a lot to be done.

He said agriculture incentives could come in the form of subsidies, research and development and infrastructure facilities to name a few.

Malaysia, he said, should fully exploit its seas and rivers to raise food production.

Kerk believed that Malaysia was forecast to face a beef shortage in the future.

He said Malaysia was expected to be short of 120,000 tonnes of beef in 2000, 170,000 tonnes in 2005 and 240,000 tonnes in 2010.

"This is a big problem. It means we need to import if we don't have enough cattle locally," he said.

Kerk also proposed that Malaysia learn from other countries like the United States, Australia, Japan, Thailand and Taiwan on how they had developed their agricultural sectors.

"We should find out what kind of facilities and incentives they offer," he said.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was quoted as saying that Malaysia was determined to make its agricultural sector relevant despite decades of rapid industrialisation and would prevent agriculture from becoming a sunset sector.

"In fact, even as we move towards becoming an industrialised nation, more than three million Malaysians remain dependent on the agricultural sector," said Abdullah.

Abdullah was also quoted as saying that the economic turmoil in the last two years had re-emphasised the importance of the agriculture sector.

"When food imports become expensive, it is important to ensure that we can be close to self-sufficiency in food production to keep our import bills low," he said.--BERNAMA

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