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## Challenges facing the agriculture sector

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THE Asia Agricultural Exposition and Convention (Agex '99) beginning in Kuala Lumpur today is set to explore some of the challenges facing the agriculture sector in the region.

Common issues include competition from industrialisation and urbanisation resulting in resources such as capital, labour and land moving away from agriculture, depletion of natural resources, slow investment by private companies in the agri-food business as well as stagnating productivity in the smallholder sector.

External influences such as globalisation, environmental concerns and consumer preferences are also creating new pressures for the agricultural industry.

The utilisation of information technology for the agri-food sector to increase competitiveness and to safeguard the quality of the environment needs to be studied as well.

"Agex '99 provides an avenue to discuss some of these concerns and to chart new directions for the agricultural industry," says Universiti Putra Malaysia's Dr Abdul Aziz Abdul Rahman, a professor of development economics and director of the university's Centre for Policy Studies.

The six-day exposition and convention and National Farmers' Day 1999 launched today by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad are the highlights of the ongoing Malaysia Agriculture, Horticulture and Agrotourism Show 1999 (Maha '99) which began early last month.

Within the Asean countries there is already an endeavour to co-operate more in the agri-food sector especially in the context of food security.

There are calls within the region for more private investors to be involved in farming under the Asean Investment Project and Asean Industrial Joint Venture mechanisms in food and agricultural production.

The idea is to enhance food exchange (trade) among Asean countries to establish regional food security.

"As we celebrate Maha '99, it is also a timely reminder for us to forge greater Asean co-operation in the agricultural sector and to identify opportunities and areas for collaboration," says Abdul Aziz.

Fifteen speakers will deliberate on a variety of topics at the three-day conference which is held at Dewan Tun Hussein Onn, Putra World Trade Centre, in Kuala Lumpur.

It is a technical forum to provide scientific and agronomic information (especially the latest technologies) to agricultural practitioners and investors.

One of the speakers is Professor Paul Davies who will talk about Leadership Investment for Greater Prosperity in Agriculture.

Davies is Vice-Principal and Professor of agricultural systems at the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, in the United Kingdom. The RAC is the oldest independent agricultural college in the English-speaking world, originally established by farmers and landowners.

Since the early 1980s, Davies has worked for governments and the private sector in most of the Asean countries. He has a particular interest and expertise in advancing agricultural technology and food chain issues.

UPM's Abdul Aziz and his colleague, Prof Mohamed Yusof Hussein, will examine the question of sustainable agriculture.

"We are looking at sustainable agriculture as an important sub-set of sustainable development which focuses on conservation of natural

resources, maintaining environmental quality and ensuring economic viability," says Abdul Aziz.

Abdul Aziz and Mohamed Yusof's paper Sustainable Agriculture illustrates unsustainable practices and the cost to the environment and natural resources. It will discuss solutions and approaches to overcome this.

The exposition component of Agex '99 showcases products and services of local and international participants. The involvement of 10 foreign companies lends the show its international dimension.

Agex '99 is jointly organised by Happening Events Sdn Bhd, Malaysian Travel Business Sdn Bhd and UPM's Faculty of Agriculture.

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