

23/09/1999

Dr M wants nation to be a food producer, exporter

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FOLLOWING the setting up of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and the ushering of Malaysia into the Information Age, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's new vision is for the nation to become a food producer and exporter.

Instead of continuing to pay hefty sums for food imports, Malaysia should maximise its resources to produce food not only for local consumption but also for export.

Dr Mahathir said this when asked what his next vision is at a dialogue with participants of the 4th Multimedia Asia Conference (MMA '99) in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

"After the MSC, I am getting double-vision," he quipped, then added, "a new vision I have is of Malaysia as an agricultural country, a food producer."

Dr Mahathir said a Malaysian with a piece of land currently thinks only in terms of whether to plant rubber or oil palm, despite the fact that the returns on rubber and palm oil are actually far less than that for vegetables or poultry, for example,

"We are not maximising the use of our land, and as a result we are importing far too much food, and that is affecting our trade balance," he added.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia, as a maritime nation, is also not making full use of its resources.

"With so much water around us, we are really not making full use of the fact to produce more fish. Not only fishing, but also to have saltwater aquaculture, which is very viable," he said.

Dr Mahathir cited Chile as an example, noting that the South American country did not have a salmon industry until 20 years ago. Today, it is the biggest exporter of salmon because the people found that they could rear salmon in the sea.

"Here, we have a wide variety of fishes which we can produce for our consumption and for export. So we are now looking at the seas around us," he said.

Dr Mahathir said during his recent trip to Sabah he was amazed to see the large number of bays and inlets suitable for rearing fish.

"We have tremendous assets in this country which are not fully utilised...the Government is looking once again at these assets. We are looking at the lakes, rivers and seas.

"There are so many things that we can utilise to enrich our country. The next vision is therefore more mundane than the previous ones, but it is no less useful," he said.

During the recent economic downturn, Malaysia could not afford to import too much food, and this led the Government to think about how to overcome the problem, the Prime Minister said.

"We may end up being a very big exporter of food, if I can persuade our people not to focus only on palm oil," he added.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians prefer planting oil palm probably because there is not much work involved. After planting a tree, they need only collect the fruits for the next 25 years and earn profits.

"But to rear fish you have to look after them every day, make sure the pH (measure of acidity or alkalinity) level is right, make sure that food is given at the right time, and make sure that the fish are healthy. There

is a lot of work, but Malaysians tend to be very lazy," he said.
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