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Mahathir-Food

DR MAHATHIR SUGGESTS UNIVERSITIES INTRODUCE AGRO-MANAGEMENT DEGREE

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 26 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today suggested that local universities introduce a new degree programme in agriculture management as part of efforts to boost domestic food production and reduce reliance on food imports.

By offering such course, the universities would help produce manpower skilled in managing plantations who would later be involved in commercialised food production besides running oil palm and rubber estates, he said.

"I believe if this is done, even small-time farmers can end up being shareholders in such estates.

"It's time that we venture into large-scale food production," he said when launching the national farmers, livestock rearers and fishermen's day celebrations.

The prime minister simultaneously opened AGEX '99 or the Asian agriculture exposition and convention at Stadium Putra in the Bukit Jalil national sports complex here.

The prime minister said the government was aware that small-time entrepreneurs lacked the financing and skills to operate food manufacturing mills on a commercialised scale.

This being the case, he suggested that such entrepreneurs squat on or use the services of millers nearby their farms.

He said it was time that the small-time players review their role in agriculture because the better-financed and better-trained operators of rubber, oil palm and cocoa estates have been reaping lucrative returns.

Dr Mahathir said if the estate operators could do it, there was no reason small-time food farmers and producers could not expand and create plantations of their own.

"I'm convinced you'll not become poor by engaging in large-scale farming. You'll certainly stand to earn better returns," he told the 5,000 farmers from throughout the country attending the function.

Increasing food production and farm yield would be a boon towards improving the economy in terms of reducing the imported food bill and checking inflationary trends, he said.

The prime minister said he called for large-scale food production with the small-time entrepreneurs in mind because the government did not want farmers to remain forever a poverty-ridden group.

"We want them to have a share of the nation's wealth," said Dr Mahathir.

He assured farmers that the government would not marginalise agriculture in its nation-building efforts although the country had increasingly tilted towards industrialisation and the information technology.

"We're always mindful that poor farmers fishermen and livestock rearers still make up a sizeable segment of the population. This displeases the government," he said.

Meanwhile, in his message for the celebrations' souvenir programme, Dr Mahathir said that for its own development, the agriculture sector would have to make changes now in the face of liberalisation in world trade and the advent of new technologies.

"I hope all those involved would master and apply estate-management methods, develop new products and apply agricultural technology compatible

to local conditions to boost productivity," he said.

Dr Mahathir then toured the various stalls promoting farming technologies and selling produce.

Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud and other cabinet members as well as state executive councillors in charge of agriculture were also present.

--BERNAMA

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