

27/08/1999

Mahathir wants farmers to go 'big-scale'

Adeline Ong

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday urged farmers to go into large-scale farming in order to bring themselves out of poverty, and at the same time lower the country's food bill.

Speaking to a crowd of about 4,000 people at the National Farmers' Day and Asia Agricultural Exposition and Convention in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir said that it is time to study about agriculture in the big way.

"If we have large-scale farming, the smaller farmers can gain from the bigger farmers in term of sharing of facilities and expertise.

"Although it is difficult for a small farmer to gain expertise to estate farming, if we have courses and degrees in the management of estates, farmers can then learn from there," he said.

Dr Mahathir added that courses and degrees in local universities should focus not only on cash crops such as rubber and palm oil, but also on food production and estate management.

By offering such course, he said, the universities will help produce manpower skilled in managing plantations who would later be involved in commercialised food production.

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

"The agriculture sector does not necessarily mean poor farmers. There are instances where farmers have become rich ... although more often than not, those are large-scale farmers," Dr Mahathir said.

He added that large-scale farming should focus on the food industry since Malaysia spends a substantial amount of money every year for the importation of food products.

Malaysia's current food bill stands at RM10 billion.

Dr Mahathir said although Malaysia is traditionally an agricultural-based country, it has realised that agriculture alone can not sustain the number of jobs required due to the population increase.

"Therefore, we have started to focus on manufacturing. However, we do not put aside the important role of agriculture and its contribution to the country," he added.

(END)