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PM's next vision is to develop the agri sector

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said his "next" vision for Malaysia is for the country to develop its agricultural sector to become a major food producer and exporter.

The Prime Minister said it was a mundane vision compared to his dream of making Malaysia a leader in information technology, but it was no less useful.

Dr Mahathir revealed this new vision during a dialogue with participants of the Multimedia Asia '99 conference. A participant had asked him what was his vision for Malaysia after the Multimedia Super Corridor.

"I am getting double vision!" he joked. "Strangely, the new vision I have for Malaysia is Malaysia as an agricultural country and a food producer."

He said this vision was born during the recent economic crisis when he realised that Malaysia had a very high food import bill and this had affected the country's trade balance.

Dr Mahathir urged land-owning Malaysians to look beyond oil palm and rubber, and consider producing food which gave higher returns. He said Malaysia had vast resources like the seas and the many bays which were ideal for saltwater aquaculture.

"There are tremendous assets in the country which are not fully utilised. There are so many things which we can use to enrich the country.

"We can become an exporter of food if I can persuade the people to think beyond oil palm," he said.

The Prime Minister fielded questions for one-and-a-half hours on various topics including the rights of the disabled and financing problems. He also spoke about his ideas for a knowledge-based economy.

Asked if he thought the MSC would succeed, Dr Mahathir said he thought it would because Malaysia had put in a lot of effort and had a track record of succeeding in ventures which many had derided as sure failures.

He gave the examples of how Malaysia had developed its electronics industry when people thought that it was impossible, how it had got the Langkawi airshow off the ground and how it had made a success of the currency controls.

"We think of ideas which appear ridiculous at times but they work out in the end," he said.

"I think there is a very good chance of success in the MSC," he said.

Asked about the concerns of the international community, Dr Mahathir said the Malaysian government was flexible and business-friendly as "that was the way we have succeeded."

"There will be rhetorical statements made by 'irresponsible' political leaders like myself," he said to laughter. "But businessmen are hardened people."

He said investors were more interested in predictability and not having "180 degree" turns like having an Islamic opposition party winning the next election and shunning IT.

"They are not likely to win. There will be no sudden changes," he said, adding that if there were, it was because the changes were necessary. They would not be done "out of spite."

The Prime Minister said the government could no longer be orthodox but had to develop new formulas to succeed.

For instance, he said it had to devise new taxation methods for e-

commerce where it would become possible for a Malaysian to buy goods already in the country but through an Internet company based abroad. It would be difficult to impose taxes on the company or even to determine where the transaction occurred.

Asked by two wheelchair-bound participants about their role in the MSC, Dr Mahathir said in the new scheme of things, mobility would not be important because IT would enable a person to do many things without having to travel.

He said there could even be tele-surgery where a doctor could operate from the other side of the world by using sophisticated communication tools.

"We will give due consideration (to the disabled) so that all will have a fair share of what the country has to offer," he said.

Asked if the country had adequate infrastructure, he said the government was open to new ideas but had to be cautious because the shelf life of technology was short and it could become obsolete very quickly.

On financing problems faced by new companies, he said the banks' conservative attitude had made him inclined to think that they were "nothing more than moneylenders."

"In Malaysia, they only take risks when it is certain. That kind of mentality has to change. I can't guarantee anything but I will try," he said.

On competition from MSC-style projects in other countries, he said the field was wide and each can learn from the other.

On his views of a knowledge-economy, he said the world was now inundated with information, and the one who can pick the useful and discard the useless would succeed.

He said when Malaysia was trying to pull itself out of the crisis, the government had to digest a flood of information and had managed to use the data to devise its strategy.

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