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Reducing food imports

ACCORDING to news reports, it's Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's "new" vision, but actually the Prime Minister has spoken many times before of his dream about making Malaysia a food producer and exporter. In some of his speeches and press conferences in the past, he has made known his concern over the country's huge import bill for food. This, in fact, has been translated into a task for the relevant ministries and government agencies to try and reduce the country's dependence on imported food items.

Success has been slow, though. Even the regional economic downturn did not spoil Malaysians' craving for imported luxuries. Dr Mahathir himself remarked, at the height of the economic crisis, that supermarkets in the city were still importing over 100 different brands of cheese and butter at a time when the people were supposed to be having less money to spend. The bigger picture is even more worrying. Last year, Malaysia's imports of food items reached RM10.52 billion from just RM5.82 billion in 1993.

Although the export of food items grew to RM6.19 billion last year from RM3.98 billion in 1993, the country is still a net importer.

While affluence had its part in creating demand for imported food luxuries, the overdependence on food imports is sometimes blamed on the country being too successful in switching from an agriculture-based economy to one based on industrial development and manufacturing. The fact is the domestic suppliers cannot provide for the demands of consumers, so they are forced to import. Self-sufficiency is either not possible or not practical. The relevant government agencies have a set mind about promoting the use of land for rubber and oil palm plantations instead of food and fruits. Partly, this is because these commodities were regarded as very important as they supported some key local manufacturing industries. This they still do, but clearly the emphasis has caused Malaysia the opportunity to cash in on another lucrative venture _ food production and export. Thailand has been doing very well in this sector and has reaped huge benefits from the international market. Malaysia, on the other hand, still has to import even rice, the people's staple food. The Agriculture Ministry has undertaken various programmes to reduce the nation's import bill of food. Malaysians are encouraged to grow their own fruits and vegetables, consume local food products, and limit their purchase of imported items only to the absolute necessities. Villagers were encouraged to turn rubber land into farms and orchards. Based on the statistics, however, Malaysians have not really changed their habits, not even during the hard times.

Even if the Government intensifies efforts to produce certain food products and feedstocks, Malaysia will continue to be a big importer of food products for a while. A healthier balance can be achieved faster, perhaps, if the authorities focus on increasing the country's export of food items instead of exerting themselves to try and reduce imports. Dr Mahathir's point about the need to maximise the use of the country's agricultural land and maritime resources becomes especially pertinent here. Instead of encouraging villagers and smallholders to replant rubber trees, they could be assigned to grow local fruits and vegetables or rear chickens on a larger scale. After all, the returns on rubber and oil palm are actually far lower than that for vegetables or poultry.

Such efforts, however, need to be systematic, streamlined and can

guarantee steady income for the participants. A government agency dealing with the conversion of rubber and oil palm estates to orchards and farms must be set up and the Government will need to look at appropriate incentives to encourage people to switch to the new activities. The private sector should also join the initiative by venturing into food product manufacturing and export on a larger and more ambitious scale, using the network of smaller farms and orchards as their sources of supply. The technologies involved in some of these ventures are expensive and require extensive training, which must be regarded as a necessary investment to correct the imbalance in the country's food bill.

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