

Optimise use of land, Dr M tells farmers

By KAMARUL WNUS

THE Government may impose higher taxes on farmers and farm operators who do not optimise their land for agricultural use, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

On the converse, he said the Government will provide some form of incentives to them if they optimise the use of their land, for instance by adopting mixed farming concept such as planting oil palm and at the same time, rearing cattle.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to newsmen -after chairing the public-private sector coordination in the agriculture sector meeting in Bangi yesterday.

Several ministers, ministers besar, chief ministers and representatives of agro-based agencies as well as farmers, fishermen and livestock rearers associations attended the meeting.

Dr Mahathir urged farmers and agriculture agencies and associations to adopt the mix or rotation farming to earn higher income rather than the present single crop system such as solely planting oil palm or rubber trees.

"From our discussions just now, we foresee vast opportunities in the agriculture sector that promise higher income than by just planting oil palm and rubber.

"The sector provides immense potential for Malaysia to attain self-sufficiency in food production, besides being an exporter of food products," he said.

Besides expanding agriculture for food sufficiency, he said venturing into horticulture, especially flower-growing, and rearing of ornamental fish also promise lucrative returns.

Dr Mahathir said the

participation of the highest level of Government and the private sector at yesterday's meeting reflected the Government's seriousness and commitment towards expanding the agricultural sector.

"We are trying to reduce our import bills on food as the increase in cost of food largely contributed to the increase in cost of living.

"For instance, if the cost of goods increase by 4 per cent, the cost of foodstuff will increase by 6 per cent or 7 per cent. Thus, the cost of living will be higher. We must seek ways to reduce the cost of living," he said.

However, he-noted that the increase in cost of foodstuff was not because of the product itself but several other factors such as handling of transportation, packaging, retail business

and the presence of a middleman.

"By producing our own food, we will be able to tackle all these problems. Not only that, we will also be able to produce food for export," he said.

To ensure adequate source of food supply in the country, Dr Mahathir said the federal and state governments as well as the private sector need to work together and play a role in tackling problems faced by farmers.

"One of the common problems in the agriculture sector is related to land matters such as the difficulty in acquiring land for farming activities and the suitability of the land for specific crops.

"Due to this, a lot of these land are kept idle. If there is cooperation between the

relevant authorities and those involved in the industry, I am sure the problems can be solved and this will boost the economy," he said.

On the rampant conversion of agriculture land for housing and industrial purposes, Dr Mahathir said the Government is aware of the problems but has to also consider the needs of other sectors.

"We also have to take care of the interest of those in the housing and industrial sectors although we are aware that the demand for land for such activities will push up the price of the land and benefit the owners

"Our only concern is the development of land in sensitive and important areas such as the water catchment areas. If we

continue to develop the water catchment areas, then there will not be enough water supply in new townships," he said.

Meanwhile, Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohd Effandi Norwawi said state governments have been asked to make sure no other activities are being carried out in the gazetted zones designated for agriculture and food production activities.

"I will visit every state to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the state governments to make sure the land under the gazetted zones will not be used for other purposes, apart from agriculture and food production," he said.

"Through the MOU, the ministry will be able to provide basic amenities, including technical and technology assistance and provide allocation to develop the land into agriculture activities.

"This will also provide easy access for investors to acquire land and loans from banks to start their farming activities," he said.

Effandi said the Government has identified some 75,000ha of potential state government land nationwide that can be zoned and developed into agriculture and food production activities.

At the meeting, state governments have also pledged to identify suitable areas for agriculture and food production activities.

For instance, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said the State Government has identified some 12,000ha for the purpose.

"We have already provided some 4,000ha to 29 area farmers associations to plant oil palm and another 2,000ha to the Chinese Vegetable Growers Association to plant vegetables," he said.