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Food should be plentiful and cheap for all

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IN recent weeks, the Government has focused attention on self-sufficiency in food production and the need for national food security. Such attention was perhaps a not unexpected reaction to the realisation that it costs the country one billion ringgit a month to import the food we eat.

That the matter deserves public support is the added realisation that much of the imported food could be produced locally.

The subject is not new. Nearly half a century ago, at a forum in London, the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, the late Abdul Aziz Isahak, was advocating that we should be self sufficient in rice production.

I pointed out that that would keep the rural Malays, who are padi farmers, in a permanent state of poverty because rubber small holders were earning much more.

He reminded us that during the Japanese military occupation people had to eat tapioca and bananas because the war prevented the importation of rice.

Agriculture, including fisheries, now accounts for only 10 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product.

Recently I asked a professor of Universiti Pertanian Malaysia the reason for the name change to Universiti Putra Malaysia. His prompt response was that agriculture in this country is a sunset industry!

The professor's mindset has much to do with our history and economy.

Before World War Two, Malaya's economy was very much dependent on the production and export of rubber and tin. Although these two commodities were largely foreign-owned and the profits remitted abroad, some of the foreign exchange earned did find its way back to pay for costs of production.

The incomes earned by the workers of the two commodities were higher than that of padi planters.

Padi farming however was almost entirely a rural Malay occupation for centuries. They produced enough for the consumption of their own families and in certain cases part of the harvest went to their absentee landlords.

Rubber tappers, mine workers and the urban population had to rely on imported rice. Economically speaking it was much cheaper to buy imported rice with incomes earned from rubber and tin, and after the war palm oil, than to cultivate rice to feed the entire population.

Such economic thinking influencing national policy explains the national development policy of the late Tun Abdul Razak.

The Tun was very concerned with the fate of the rural Malays whose land holdings were becoming uneconomic brought about by generations of subdivisions of ancestral lands according to the Islamic law of inheritance.

He introduced land development schemes through Felda under which the landless were each given 10-acre (four-hectare) lots planted with rubber or oil palm. The scheme proved highly successful and alleviated rural poverty more than somewhat.

In the urban areas, Tun Razak encouraged the establishment of labour-intensive industries to create a society of full employment.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad galvanised the country to an industrialised manufacturing sector geared towards an export economy.

The sum total of successive government policies, which has developed us economically with progressive reduction of poverty and a higher standard of living, has nonetheless made us dependent on food imports.

The Government's declared aim now is to strike a balanced mixed economy with a push towards commercial farming to attain self-sufficiency in food production.

It is a most laudable objective. With advances made in science and technology in food production there is every reason to hope and believe that we are capable of producing most of the food we eat.

Highly developed industrialised countries like in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia are self-sufficient in food. The world's population is increasing at an alarming rate. Food production will become the world's top priority.

The farmer of tomorrow will not be associated with poverty or treated like peasants of the past. He will be an educated and skilled entrepreneur simply because food is an essential element of life.

In the early 1950s, I was an assistant district officer of Ulu Kelantan, a district areawise at the time larger than the State of Negri Sembilan.

My duties often took me to Batu Melintang near the Thailand border. The place could only be reached on foot through jungle from Jeli.

It was a picturesque valley settlement with the upper reaches of the Pergau river running right through it. Crystal clear water cascading through rapids ended in pools teeming with fish.

The villagers had everything - rice, maize, vegetables, chicken, cattle and fish, all locally produced. They were never hungry. They however, had no cash.

They panned for gold dust from the streams feeding the river which they exchanged across the border for salt and textiles. Otherwise they were practically isolated from the rest of the world but were happy.

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Likewise, the way to a happy and contented nation is when the people's stomachs are full. Food should be plentiful and cheap for all the people.

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