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`Increase food output'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today spoke of the importance of increasing food production for local consumption and export as well as the need to reduce food imports.

He said the time was right for the country to go into food production as there was great potential in doing so.

"Maybe some people say that there is not enough land for this but food production can be done with intelligence. There is a lot of land that is not being utilised," Dr Mahathir said in his keynote address titled "The new vision on agriculture" at the Seminar on Investment Opportunities in the Agricultural Sector.

The one-day seminar was held at the Palace of the Golden Horses. It was organised by the Agriculture Ministry and co-sponsored by Bank Pertanian Malaysia, Permodalan Nasional Bhd, Sunway Group and Sime Darby Bhd.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia had some unique resources.

He said there were many lagoons off the East Coast and in the South China Sea that could be used for rearing fish.

"Chile has gone into producing smoked salmon on a large scale and its markets are the Scandinavian countries and Canada, and it is now one of the biggest producers," Dr Mahathir said, adding that he was emphasising the point as there was a very good potential in the venture.

He said while fresh-water fish did not last as long as salt-water fish, this could be overcome with the present technology.

Dr Mahathir said the country was capable of producing very good fruits and vegetables, adding that crop rotation was important.

He felt that it was not being sufficiently practised due to lack of skills.

"I have spoken to universities and they have agreed to teach crop rotation skills," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the results of agricultural research conducted here were not being utilised by people who had the capacity to invest in agriculture.

"The results of Mardi (Malaysian Agriculture Research and Development Institute)'s research should be utilised by people with the commercial capacity," he said, adding that research should get its returns.

Dr Mahathir also spoke on the marketing, packaging and labelling aspects of agricultural produce.

"When I go to the supermarket, I see that local fruits are dumped in a pile while foreign fruits are well-packaged," he said.

He said in agriculture, capital management and investment were needed. "We want to produce more food in the country and we want to provide more subsidies for it."

He noted that while the country was at one time a large rearer of pigs, it was now a large producer of poultry and eggs.

"I am sure we can produce other things very efficiently. In every area we have the potential. All we need is the commitment and belief."

Later during a question-and-answer session, he said the country was serious about increasing food production.

Asked why some States were not supporting efforts on the matter, he said it could be that they had a different agenda for housing and industry.

"But some States are coming around to the idea," Dr Mahathir said.

On the difficulty in getting funds for agriculture, he said some bankers

behaved like money-lenders and not financiers.

"Some of our venture-capitalists do not even venture," Dr Mahathir said.

Meanwhile Agriculture Minister Datuk Effendi Norwawi said the ministry was reinventing itself to become pro-business and investor-friendly.

He considers the move necessary if Dr Mahathir's vision of turning Malaysia into a leading food producer were to be realised.

The ministry's target is to produce RM80 billion worth of food within the next five years.

The new set-up required all 12 agencies under the ministry to work together, said Effendi.

Over the last three to four months, these agencies have been aligned to move alongside each other.

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