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MAHATHIR-AGRICULTURE

MAHATHIR TO PROVIDE INSIGHTS ON REVITALISING AGRO SECTOR

By: Mohd Arshi Daud

KUALA LUMPUR, April 20 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to provide valuable insights on how to turn agriculture into one of Malaysia's engines of growth on Monday.

He is expected to unveil his vision on the subject at a one-day seminar here on "Investment Opportunities in the Agricultural Sector," organised by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Dr Mahathir will present a keynote address entitled "The New Vision on Agriculture" at the seminar, the first ever high-profile event held by the ministry. Agriculture Minister Datuk Dr Effendi Norwawi said Dr Mahathir would "signal loud and clear" his next vision for the country, whereby agriculture would be transformed into one of the drivers of the knowledge-economy.

Last September, the premier said his next vision after the Multimedia Super Corridor project would be in developing the country's agricultural sector and turning Malaysia into a food producer.

"I think he will also confirm that the government will give its fullest support for this sector," said Effendi who did not disclose what sort of incentives were on Dr Mahathir's mind.

However, he hinted that the incentives package would mirror those offered to the manufacturing sector when the government embarked upon promoting industrial activity.

"We are looking at all angles to come up with the best structure that will encourage private sector investment in this sector," he told Bernama in an interview.

The agricultural sector has taken a back seat in recent years after Malaysia accentuated its focus on the industrial sector. As a result, Malaysia has to spend RM11 billion to RM12 billion annually on food imports.

Effendi said under the third National Agricultural Policy (1998-2010), the government would seek to turn the agricultural sector into a modern, dynamic and competitive sector which would be private sector, technology and market-driven.

At the seminar, the private sector will be briefed on how the government will support them to make this policy a successful one.

"It will be a day when we demonstrate to them that agricultural sector is a viable investment. We will be showing the potential areas of investment like fisheries, horticulture, livestock rearing, herbal and biotechnology.

"The ministry will be pledging its support in terms of technical, research and development, production and marketing. We will also be discussing the incentives like financial packages for investment in this sector," he said.

In addition, some 400 participants at the seminar, comprising the captains of industry as well as foreign and local investors, will be informed of the available technology in Malaysia so they would not have to start from scratch.

Effendi said international and Malaysian experts in various fields of agriculture would speak at the seminar. They include Dr Robert Lee, a biotechnology specialist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Lee, who is an expert in biotechnology and pharmaceutical and drug industries, would discuss the potential of such industries.

Although these industries tend to have long gestation periods of five to 10 years, Effendi said they would provide "very impactful returns" to the economy as they generated billions of ringgit worth of business.--BERNAMA

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