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PM-FOOD

MAHATHIR: M'SIA NEEDS TO PRODUCE MORE FOOD & FOOD VARIETIES

KUALA LUMPUR, April 24 (Bernma) -- Prime minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said Malaysia needed to produce more quantities food and more varieties of food that would cater for local needs, import substitution and export.

This required commitment but could be done efficiently and profitably, he said in his keynote address, "The new vision on agriculture" at a one-day seminar on investment opportunities in the agricultural sector here.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was already considered to be big in the food industry here like biscuit-making "but I am sure we can produce more."

He told plantation companies to unlock their minds to see the potential of crop production beyond their oil palm and rubber crops.

Plantation companies, he said, were replanting their rubber trees for oil palm "but at the rate they are cutting their rubber trees, Malaysia is going to get a serious problem of oversupply (of palm oil in the future)."

By then, he said everybody in the oil palm industry would rush to the government and ask for some help.

He said they might not be asking for tax rebates but subsidies from the government then.

"We think it is (high) time for us to go into food production since not much land was required for crop production as the same land for oil palm and rubber could be used for crop production," Dr Mahathir said.

He noted that there were large tracts of land available for such activity as many were under utilised or not utilised throughout the country

Dr Mahathir said plantation companies could emulate what was being done in Europe where crop rotation and mixed crop cultivation were done intelligently.

Food crops on European farms are supplied to supermarket chains which also advise farmers what crops to plant and what grade and sizes they require.

"We need to do this on a large scale and this requires people with the money," he said. "I think plantation companies have done well and they should go into this."

Dr Mahathir also said research should be carried out on improving crop production and quality by the private and public sectors.

He said although some good results had been achieved on such research, they had not not been commercialised by people who had the capacity to invest.

The prime minister also advised oil palm plantation owners to rear cattle on their plantations by growing grass for feed.

"It can be done efficiently and there is a huge potential to be reaped here," he said.

Dr Mahathir also drew to the attention of buying land in Australia to rear cattle because of the availability of large tracts of land there.

On pork consumption in the country, he said it had not be popular of late because of the Japanese encephalitis/Nipah virus outbreak.

He also felt that pig rearing activity could also be undertaken by Malaysians outside the country.

Dr Mahathir also touched on how to better market Malaysian crops which he said would be better received if they were "propely packahged, labelled and branded to make them more attractive."

He had observed that in many local supermarkets, foreign fruits were

nicely packed but the local ones were "dumped into a basket, uncategorised and unwrapped."

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysian food crops should be graded and cited an example like the pungency of chilly which would be helpful to chilly sauce makers.

He also commented on the tremendous potential for fish breeding in Malaysia as there were a lot of suitable places for the activity and that the country could also develop its own technology and skills for fish breeding.

For instance, he said there were a lot of salt water lagoons in the East Coast and the South China Sea that could be used for saltwater fish breeding.

He also said the Terengganu state government had agreed to use the state's lagoons to undertake aquaculture activity. -- BERNAMA

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