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EXPERT-HERBS

M'SIA'S BIO-DIVERSITY CAN IDENTIFY BIO-ACTIVE COMPOUND IN PLANTS

KUALA LUMPUR, April 24 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's rich bio-diversity and the traditional use of plants and herbs as medicine by different cultures provide opportunities for identifying useful bio-active compound in plant and animal species, said a bio-technology expert today.

Dr Robert K. Lee, a Malaysian who is currently a director at the Health Sciences and Technology Division in the Harvard University-Massachusetts Institute Technology, said these opportunities might be realised by establishing a chemical library and database to document and house useful indigenous species or their extracts.

"The development of the chemical library and database may be facilitated by the contributions of Malaysian scientists, by collaboration between Malaysian universities, international universities, research centres and the bio-pharmaceutical industry," he said.

Speaking on the subject of "Investment Opportunities in Agriculture Biotechnology" at a seminar in Seri Kembangan near here, Dr Lee said that Malaysia is one of the world hotspots of biodiversity with its 12,000 flowering plant species that are thought to have medicinal purposes.

However, only 100 species have been systematically evaluated for medicinal properties, he added.

"The potential economic value of natural resources might well be realised by discovering novel, non-obvious uses for medicinal plants, or by discovering new methods for isolating bio-active chemicals.

"Intellectual property generated by such discoveries can be the basis for the further development of the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries in Malaysia," said Dr Lee.

He said that biotechnology has increasingly become a dynamic healthcare factor during the last two or three years.

He pointed out that the Morgan Stanley Dean Witter genomics index gained 345 percent and 362 percent over the last six and two months, respectively compared with the American Stock Exchange drug index which gained on three percent and five percent during the same periods.

"A major reason for the growth of the genomics-biotechnology sector is its increasingly relevance for the pharmaceutical discovery," he added.

The one-day seminar themed "Investment Opportunities in the Agriculture Sector" organised by the Agriculture Ministry, was officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today. -- BERNAMA

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