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Optimising farm land use (HL)

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BANGI, Thurs. - The Government plans to employ a "carrot and stick" approach to ensure the optimum use of agricultural land, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"If they do not maximise the land usage, maybe the Government will impose a higher tax so that we get some benefit.

"But if they make maximum use of their land, for example by rearing cattle in their palm oil plantations, we may give something to them," he told a press conference after chairing a meeting of the Agricultural Sector Co-ordinating Council for the Private and Public Sector here.

The Prime Minister was asked how the Government could ensure the optimum utilisation of agricultural land by private companies, government agencies and farmers' associations.

The three-hour meeting was attended by several Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers and Menteri Besar, and representatives from the private sector.

They included Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohd Effendi Norwawi, Chief Minister of Sarawak Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob.

On the problem of agricultural land being converted for industrial use and housing in the face of increasing food imports, Dr Mahathir said he found the problem "a bit worrying".

He explained the dilemma: "The change in the status of agricultural land to industrial and residential land happens too quickly.

"However, we realise that we have to cater for the needs of housing and industry, especially as it causes the price of land to go up and so landowners are definitely interested in selling their land."

Dr Mahathir said another problem that arose in securing more land not only for agricultural but also industrial and residential purposes was that some of the targeted land was in important places, like in water catchment areas.

"If we are not careful in these areas, there is a possibility that we will not have water. We will have industry, housing and large towns but no water."

Dr Mahathir admitted to the difficulties faced by state and federal authorities in managing land, due to possible clashes of interests between the private sector and authorities at Federal or state-level.

"But if there is co-operation and efforts by all, especially the State Governments which are empowered to deal with land matters, I am certain that we can solve them," he said.

Greater co-operation will also expedite agricultural projects. "Sometimes it takes two to three years to approve an application. This causes delays in our economic development," he said.

Asked whether the meeting managed to secure greater commitment from the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers towards the agriculture sector, Dr Mahathir said: "States which have large tracts of land like Johor and Pahang can easily commit because they have a lot of land.

"I am also certain that other States will have adequate land, because there are certain types of agriculture which does not require large areas of land, but the income is encouraging."

Asked about the Government's commitment towards achieving the targets set in the Third National Agricultural Policy to make Malaysia a major

food producer, Dr Mahathir said it was "very, very serious."

"When I say that our next Wawasan (vision) is in agriculture, I am very serious about it ... I am not joking," he added.

He said the Government fully supported the Agriculture Ministry's plans to achieve the NAP3 targets, and was confident that the targets would be met. He also said the Government had approved adequate funds to the ministry to achieve the targets. Dr Mahathir said agriculture was an increasingly important sector for the country in the face of increased food imports which contribute to the rising costs of living.

"We need to handle this problem in a manner which will make us adequate food producers but also food exporters."

On Umno, Dr Mahathir, who is also the party president, was asked whether he would appoint new office bearers at the next Umno supreme council meeting on June 5.

Dr Mahathir said: "I cannot tell, it's a secret, even I do not really know ... not ready yet."

Earlier, three working papers were presented at the meeting. These included "Implementation Efforts of the Third National Agricultural Policy (NAP3)" and "Co-operation between the Federal Government, States and Agriculture Sector in Developing Agriculture".

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