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PM: Malaysia can be major food exporter

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MALAYSIA has great potential to develop its agriculture and food production sectors, not just to replace imports but also to become a major food exporter, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

He said Malaysian companies should be aware of the vast resources available in the country, and look for opportunities in food production, develop the necessary skills and expertise in mixed farming and crop rotation.

"For example, we have a lot of areas throughout Malaysia that are suitable for rearing fish and other aquaculture projects. The amount of fish that we can produce in these areas is tremendous. Over the years we should be able to even export," Dr Mahathir said.

He was delivering the keynote address on "The New Vision on Agriculture" at a seminar on "Investment Opportunities in the Agricultural Sector" in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The one-day seminar, organised by the Ministry of Agriculture, hopes to come up with comprehensive project proposals from the private sector for investments, research and development (R and D) on new agriculture projects.

The Prime Minister had previously commented that after the Multimedia Super Corridor, his next vision for the country is to see its diverse resources optimised to produce high quality agriculture and food products. This would reduce the country's import bill for food items, and at the same time generate income from the export of such products.

Dr Mahathir said several lagoons in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia have been identified as suitable for aquaculture projects, and the Terengganu state government has expressed support for their further development.

"We are also too addicted to single crops like rubber, cocoa and oil palm. There is no reason why we cannot produce other things. We are capable of producing very good quality fruits and vegetables, and should venture into these fields intelligently and in a bigger scale," he added.

Dr Mahathir said he had seen how farms in the UK that employed a small staff could produce all kinds of fruits and vegetables for specific supermarket chains.

"This is not so in Malaysia. Here we produce one crop and that's all. We don't rotate our crops. We need to develop the skills in mixed farming and crop rotation," he said.

Dr Mahathir said to undertake such projects on a large scale will require substantial capital investment, and proposed that plantation companies take the lead in venturing into these new sectors.

He said companies venturing into the agriculture and food production sectors should also be prepared to conduct research and development (R and D), as well as properly package and market their products.

Speaking without a prepared text, Dr Mahathir gave various examples of agriculture and food production projects that Malaysian businesses and entrepreneurs could invest in.

These include rearing cattle in oil palm estates for beef, processing traditional herbs for medicine, poultry for meat and eggs, processed food and condiments, and commercialisation of hundreds of research findings by the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Mardi).

"In almost every area of agriculture, we have tremendous potential. All

we need is the commitment and belief," he said.

Dr Mahathir said where large tracts of suitable land are not available in the country, the Government has no objection if Malaysia companies invest in farmland overseas, utilising Malaysian vessels to transport the products back home or to their export markets.

"This seminar is for you, the business people. We want you to be interested in these projects and to invest your money. Unblock your minds and don't just see oil palm and rubber. If we can succeed in producing oil palm and rubber, I don't see why we cannot succeed in these (other sectors)," he said.

The objectives of the one-day seminar include attracting investments from domestic and foreign companies in the agriculture sector, and to explore new investment opportunities in the agricultural sector as identified in the Third National Agricultural Policy (1998-2001) or NAP3.

The NAP3 seeks to provide the gradual but effective transformation of the agricultural and forestry sectors, maximising income through the optimal utilisation of resources in the sector.

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