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Time to give priority to food production

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Agriculture Minister Datuk Dr Effendi Norwawi have in their recent statements rekindled public imagination when they spoke on the importance of agriculture and food production.

Dr Mahathir revealed that the nation's next "Wawasan" or vision was in agriculture while Effendi stated that all States needed to designate land for permanent food production.

It is high time for us not only to talk but also act seriously about food production. The question of boosting food production and reducing the country's food import bill has been bandied about for years but no concrete follow-up action was taken to show tangible results.

The Third National Agriculture Policy (1998-2010) aims to reduce Malaysia's reliance on imported food, enhance food security and combat inflation by reducing the food bill.

However, the reality is that the nation is burdened with a RM12 billion food import bill annually.

The Prime Minister's proposal to make agriculture the next "Wawasan" is commendable but it must mean putting in place a concrete action plan involving the fullest participation of the Federal and State Governments, and the private sector to ensure the realisation of the agriculture vision.

We need the right policy, a pro-business Agriculture Ministry and above all the co-operation of all the State Governments as land, which is crucial for food production, is basically a State matter.

In this connection, it is pertinent to note the assurance by Effendi that the Agriculture Ministry will be completely revamped to have it transformed into a business-friendly government organisation and be "fully supportive of all investors".

He said his Ministry would be receptive to the private sector's demand for speed, efficiency and cost efficiency adding that the Government wanted to reverse the perception that agriculture was a backward and traditional economic sector so that it would be viewed as a modern and hi-tech sector.

What is even more important is the availability of land for food production. It has been revealed by the Agriculture Ministry that a total of 70,000 hectares of agricultural land has been earmarked for food production.

Effendi had said that he would be signing an agreement with State Governments to designate areas as permanent food production land which could be utilised by developers and investors to venture into agriculture with the help of banks which could provide the loans.

Making available suitable land by the State Governments for food production, particularly for growing vegetables and fruits for local consumption is vital.

In the past and till now, much State land had been made available for housing and industry and it is now timely for land to be also allocated for food production.

There is a need for a national food production policy to determine the most suitable types of farming which can be carried out.

Other than providing land to big corporations which are interested in applying for land for farming, small farmers with the ability to work on

the designated areas should also be considered.

Sometime last year, the Federation of Malaysian Vegetable Growers Association was reported to have called on the Government to allocate more land for the cultivation of greens to reduce dependence on imports.

According to the federation, import dependence was one of the main causes of the shortage of vegetable supply in the country leading to drastic price increases from time to time. At present we import up to 46 per cent of our vegetables.

As Malaysia has so far been heavily dependent on food imports, producing more food for local consumption should be given the highest priority.

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