

'Tap wealth of genomes'

SUN - 3 JUL 2001

Research in biotechnology can boost economic growth, says PM

By **B. Suresh Ram**

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today called for more serious research in biotechnology to tap the country's wealth of genomes which hold enormous potential.

He said research in the biotechnology field can contribute towards the development of sophisticated industries that can boost national economic growth.

Malaysian scientists should cooperate with scientists from other countries in collecting data and samples of the genomes available here, he added.

The country has one of the oldest forests in the world and, thus, has the potential to have industries based on plants and other forest genomes, he said when launching the

Science, Technology and Environment Ministry's Silver Jubilee celebrations here.

Mahathir said: "To ensure this, we have to control the wealth of our forests so that it will not be taken out of the country by those who seek to enrich themselves by undertaking the necessary research.

"I am confident that with our wealth of genome availability, a lot of biotechnology industries will be established."

For this reason, the government has agreed to set up the Biotech Valley within the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Mahathir said: "Efforts will be undertaken to collect and streamline genome data to enable the production of various medicines and other products."

The government will continue to provide assistance to those involved in research and development,

Mahathir added.

He said Malaysia was one of the first developing countries to emphasise on the preservation of the environment.

"However, we are blamed for not being caring towards the environment.

"In truth, we are aware of the problems facing the environment and we will protect our forests stringently," he said.

Apart from deriving forest products such as timber, there is also a need to maintain forests as water catchment areas as well as for generating electricity and agricultural purposes.

"We cannot give in to the demand of foreigners, especially their NGOs, to maintain our forests as a 'carbon sink' to absorb the excessive carbon dioxide produced by them without taking into account the needs of our citizens," he said.