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`Invest in food production'

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PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - To overcome the shortage of premium land and reduce the country's food import bill, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today asked large plantation companies to invest in food production.

The companies have been asked to use a portion of their land for food crop, aquaculture and livestock farming on a commercial basis.

Oil palm plantation owners have, in particular, been asked to go into integrated livestock farming by rearing cattle in the estates.

There are about four million hectares of plantation land in the country which can support one million heads of cattle. At present, only 100,000 heads are being reared in plantations.

Malaysia's food import bill stands at RM13 billion a year.

Dr Mahathir met representatives of agriculture companies and associations, together with the relevant government agencies, at the second meeting of the co-ordinating council for the public and private sectors in the agriculture industry.

Among those present were several Cabinet ministers and Menteri Besar.

Briefing reporters after the three-hour meeting, Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohd Effendi Norwawi said the Menteri Besar had said there was a shortage of premium land as most of it was already owned by large plantation companies.

They also said the remaining land was needed for new townships and other development.

"Therefore, the Prime Minister asked the plantation owners to look into investing in food production. The companies agreed to look further into the matter and we (Agriculture Ministry) will work with them," he said.

Effendi added that Malaysia was only 23 per cent sufficient in meat production and at best, this could increase to a mere 28 per cent by 2020 as the country was running out of land.

He also said big companies were previously reluctant to invest in food production because the palm oil sector was lucrative but this sector had since become volatile.

He acknowledged that the plantation companies would not have the expertise in food production but added that they had the resources to acquire it.

The ministry would provide the technical expertise if necessary by sending its officers to be based with the new projects, as it had done with a fisheries project in Langkawi.

Malaysia, he said, had a lot to do to become competitive globally and to make agriculture the third engine of growth after manufacturing and tourism.