

30 OCT 2001

Mahathir-Food

DR MAHATHIR ASKS PLANTERS TO TURN M'SIA INTO MAJOR FOOD PRODUCER

PUTRAJAYA, Oct 30 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has asked big plantation companies to consider allocating part of their land for food production to enable Malaysia emerge as a major food producer.

The Prime Minister said they could also use their plantation land to rear up to one million heads of cattle which would allow the country reduce its meat import.

Dr Mahathir raised those suggestions at the second meeting of the Coordination Council of the Public and Private Sector in the Agriculture Sector which he chaired at the Prime Minister's Department here today.

Briefing reporters on the outcome of the three-hour long meeting, Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohamed Effendi Norwawi said by going into food crops and aqua-culture such companies could diversify income and not solely depend on oil palm or rubber.

There are some four million hectares of plantation land in the country.

Mohamed Effendi said it was possible for the companies to be involved in large-scale and commercialised food production for they already possessed land, management skills, financial means as well as research and development capabilities.

"So the council discussed how these big companies could play a role in making Malaysia one of the world's premier food producers," he said.

As for the need to rear cattle, the minister said the nation's meat self-sufficiency level currently stood at 23 per cent and if efforts were not done to promote cattle-rearing, the figure would only go up to 28 per cent by 2010 at the very best.

Mohamed Effendi said given the uncertainty of the commodity market and the current economic situation, it was timely for companies to diversify into food production.

He said the meeting also stressed the importance of Malaysia striving to improve its competitiveness in the region, citing that none of the top 20 companies in the region's fishery industries was Malaysian.

According to Mohamed Effendi, some of the plantation company representatives attending the meeting agreed to study Dr Mahathir's suggestions.

"And our ministry will work closely with them and convince them on the viability of rearing cattle in oil palm plantations on an integrated basis," he said.

He also pledged the ministry's assistance to those needing help to get started in food crop, fisheries or livestock activities.

Queried on the input of several Menteri Besar who were present, Mohamed Effendi said: "They are happy to allocate whatever land available for this endeavour but they are saying that there is no more land today.

"Most of the land have been taken up by large plantation companies and the ones available today are smallholders' land. Other than that, there are other demands for housing and township developments. So there is very limited land."

Mohamed Effendi said this was why Dr Mahathir touched on the need to look at the option of using plantation areas to grow food crop and rear cattle.

The council, which was set up last year, has 56 appointed members comprising federal ministers, menteri besar and chief ministers, senior government officials, as well as private sector and non-governmental

organisation representatives.

-- BERNAMA

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