

03/04/2001

Make use of Mardi's expertise, private sector told

Eirmalasare Bani

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the private sector has failed to exploit the expertise of the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Mardi) in finding new agricultural technologies.

He said that unless the private sector takes a more serious approach, the country's vision to make agriculture "a real engine of growth" will not materialise.

The Government has a vision to make agriculture the third engine of growth for the country, behind manufacturing and information technology.

"We have lots of products which can be commercialised, but people are more keen in saving their money to buy shares," Dr Mahathir told reporters after his working visit to Mardi in Serdang yesterday in conjunction with the agency's 30th anniversary.

Under the Third National Agricultural Policy (2000-2010), the agricultural sector is expected to contribute about 12.6 per cent or RM26.2 billion to the country's gross domestic product by 2005.

The Government also needs RM30 billion to finance agricultural research and projects, of which 70 per cent will be sourced from the private sector.

To date, the take-up rate among the private sector has been less than encouraging and confined to plantation-based companies such as Golden Hope Plantations Sdn Bhd and Sime Darby Bhd, which have collaborated with Mardi to increase their commercial output with the use of the latest research and development techniques.

Dr Mahathir said that if Mardi's findings can be utilised effectively, it can help the private sector chalk up higher profits as well as help the agency to secure more contract researches.

"When some things need to be studied to find out whether they are commercially viable, Mardi can do the basic researches and find out whether the products can be sold or not," he added.

On whether the Government has plans to increase the research budget for Mardi, he said:

"It is not about the budget for agriculture. It is the exploitation of what we have found. There is no point increasing the budget when people are not utilising (the findings)."

The Government is, however, planning to review benefits given to scientists working with Mardi.

"For Mardi scientists, their chances to be promoted are quite limited when compared to those working for universities. If they are hired by the private sector, their salaries could be higher. If this is not corrected, they will not stay with the agency," Dr Mahathir said.

Mardi is reportedly seeking RM900 million for its research and development activities under the Eighth Malaysian Plan (2001-2005).

The allocation is necessary to develop new and improved agricultural technologies which can be used to modernise the sector as well as maximise income from agriculture, in line with the policy.

The agency has also submitted a proposal to amend the Mardi Act 1969 to allow the agency to commercialise its technological findings.

Agriculture Minister Datuk Dr Mohd Effendi Norwawi said the amendment will, among others, allow foreign companies to take part in joint researches with Mardi, and obtain some "intellectual property rights" in the collaboration.

Dr Mahathir also witnessed yesterday the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Mardi and Glowing Hill Sdn Bhd for the production of low cholesterol eggs.

(END)