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Mahathir-Research

AVOID THE GREED OF DRUG COMPANIES, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 1 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that the avarice shown by the big drug companies must be avoided so that the whole world can benefit from the researches in the field of life sciences.

The prime minister said that those involved in research should not be so profit-oriented to the extent that they forgot about their social obligations.

Citing the example of the treatment of HIV-Aids, Dr Mahathir said that clinging rigidly to their proprietary rights, the drug companies refused to let others produce the drug unless huge royalties were paid.

Opening the BioMalaysia 2002 international symposium and exhibition on biotechnology here, Dr Mahathir said that governments of the poor countries were thus forced to protect these rights, maintain the high prices and see their own people suffer and die for lack of treatment.

"Millions of sufferers will die as the drug companies make billions for their healthy owners and shareholders. Lives apparently are not so important as intellectual property and the returns on investments," he said.

Admitting that such companies spent huge sums of money on research and development, Dr Mahathir noted that not all that they discovered at great expense was worth anything at all.

"Once in a while they would come across a fantastic cure. They would try not only to recover the cost but to make huge profits for themselves by pricing their drugs beyond the reach of those most in need of treatment," he said in expressing his disappointment over the matter.

The prime minister said there must be more transparency as to the cost and recovery and answers to the question of how long should a copyright be protected and the percentage of profit that should be considered legitimate and morally right.

Turning to the huge outcry over genetically modified agricultural food products, he said GM food held great promise for the starving people in this world.

Warning that GM products should not be tested on these hapless people, Dr Mahathir said that those involved must expend a lot of money to verify the harmful effects as quickly as science would allow them.

"It would be unfortunate indeed if millions must die because the rich have decided to reject Genetically Modified food in favour of the more costly normal products," he said.

Dr Mahathir also spoke on the need for the international community to spell out the ethics of the life sciences and look into the setting up of enforcement agencies before biotechnology research went any further.

He said that already animals were being cloned and some were trying to clone humans.

"It seems that we can now produce any number of Einsteins and also numerous Hitlers. The ethical scientist may not want to do this but there will be crooked scientists working under crooked regimes who may flood the earth with uncontrollable monsters," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was fine to produce specific organs for transplanting in human bodies but people should not try to play God and think of populating this earth with creatures which may destroy them in the end.

Speaking at a media conference later, Dr Mahathir elaborated on the need for those who produce GM food to find out the short- or long-term effects, if any.

"At the moment, there is a kind of hysteria directed at GM food of all kinds. Is there a basis for it, we have to know. If there is no basis, the GM food can solve a lot of starvation problems," he said.

He said a lot of GM food was being held up in Africa because of the fear that it might cause harm despite the fact that millions of people on that continent were actually starving.

-- BERNAMA

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