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Guardian of the rice bowl

KEDAH is long known as the 'rice bowl' of Malaysia, and quite aptly so. As the country's main rice producer, it contributed some 50 per cent of the 1.63 metric tonne total produced in 2001. The state has 130,671 registered paddy farmers, working as much as 122,804 hectares of paddy fields.

Standing proud in Kedah's agriculture heritage is Padiberas Nasional Bhd (Bernas), the nation's rice custodian, which commands 25 per cent of Kedah's paddy market share.

Bernas' primary role is to regulate the development of the national paddy and rice industry to achieve sustainable rice sufficiency in Malaysia, via paddy procurement, processing, trading, as well as distribution. Listed on the main board of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange in 1997, it was awarded the sole right to import rice into Malaysia for 15 years, from 1996.

The group also undertakes social and commercial obligations, namely representing the government in managing and disbursing subsidies to paddy farmers, managing the Bumiputera Rice Miller Scheme and acting as buyer of last resort. While it has since diversified into other business ventures - logistics, packaging, farming, engineering, realty and construction - its mainstay remains rice distribution.

Bernas has been involved in Kedah since 1972, at that time, via the Lembaga Padi dan Beras Negara. In that year itself, 11 integrated complexes were built to cater for the expanding production of rice for the state. Today, Bernas has 15 complexes, with a milling capacity of 423,280 metric tonnes, and drying capacity of 259,500 metric tonnes, operating in Kedah. Nationwide, it manages 29 warehouses, which serve as distribution centres for the group's imported rice.

'In order to optimise the usage and increase the efficiency of Bernas' complexes in the area, the complexes will undergo an integration process where they will be upgraded to be "nucleus complexes",' says Yahya Abu Bakar, Bernas' group managing director.

'By having integrated and efficient complexes, high quality rice can be produced, and the quality of life of the Kedah farmers can be further enhanced.'

Kedah is an important part of Bernas' network, contributing 43 per cent to the group's rice business, amounting to 118,375 metric tonnes purchased between January and July 2002.

Thus, the group is determined that its activities contribute to the state's welfare, both economically and socially, in line with the Kedah Maju 2010 Action Plan.

Bernas launched the 'Health Support Programme' in 2001, a vital community project for the farming community in Kedah, Perlis and Terengganu.

Under this programme, which is in its second year now, Bernas provides a van for each of the said state as a mode of transportation for paddy farmers in need of treatment and health checks at government clinics or hospitals.

Another important contribution is Bernas' RM2 million nationwide educational fund for farmers' children who excel in their examinations. The fund was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Kedah in 1999.

'Bernas, who has been playing the role of paddy and rice guardian,

contributes to the development of Kedah as one of the generators of the state's development,' says Yahya.