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## Honorary citizenship plan for foreigners

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PETALING JAYA, Thurs. - The Government is considering conferring honorary citizenship on foreigners, especially those with expertise and skills that can speed up the country's development, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the Government wanted foreigners to work in Malaysia and contribute to the economy.

He said citizenship would be a way to recognise their contributions to Malaysia.

"Many countries have this programme, so we are thinking about doing the same," he told a Press conference after opening the 'Learning from Korea' seminar at the Sunway Convention Centre.

It is learnt that the Government's move was prompted by requests from South Korean and Japanese scientists to stay and work in Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir broached the citizenship subject when responding to a question during a dialogue at the seminar.

A participant, who has dealings with South Korean businessmen, said many of them were interested in settling down in Malaysia. He wanted to know whether the Government was willing to give them permanent-resident status.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was prepared to study individual cases and those with merit would be given PR.

"Of course, we will be more responsive if people come in here with something to offer, like starting a small business with the people here."

Asked when the policy would be implemented, the Prime Minister said, the Government was still studying the matter.

"I don't know whether we need to have some amendment to the law, but we have to make provisions."

On whether honorary citizenship would also be granted to those who could contribute in non-economic fields, he said, a degree of flexibility could be exercised.

"We can be flexible and see whether people can do something that is good for Malaysia."

At present, Dr Mahathir said, the Government allowed selected foreigners to stay in the country under the Malaysia My Second Home Programme (formerly known as Silver Hair Programme).

Participants in the programme are given Social Visit Passes which do not guarantee PR status. The pass is renewable every year.

Dr Mahathir said the Government had also given PR status to foreign businessmen with investments in the country.

Asked whether a limit would be set on the number of honorary citizenship recipients, he said, the Government had not thought about it.

Dr Mahathir said the proposed honorary citizenship was different from Australia's migration programme.

He himself had been conferred honorary citizenship of Turkmenistan in 1994, the Albanian city of Tirana in 1993 and the US city of Houston in 1978.

South Korea granted its Dutch football coach Guus Hiddink the country's first honorary citizenship for the national team's remarkable performance in the World Cup, and the Canadian House of Commons has also passed a resolution granting honorary citizenship to former South African President Nelson Mandela.

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether the Government was able to sustain

the ringgit-US dollar peg which has been in place since September 1998.

"Nobody is complaining, our economy is doing well, there is no ringgit black market. This shows the peg is good and accepted by all," he said.