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PM on reaping the rewards of biotechnology

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Malaysia needs to market its biotechnology products so that the industry can become a new pillar of the knowledge economy, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Biotechnology was not new to Malaysia, but the country's rich natural resources and scientific expertise have not been commercialised to reap the benefits.

Local research and development have not seen many new patents being registered or new biotech enterprises launched, he said.

"This situation reflects the inadequacies within the country which has not matched the resources and potential," Dr Mahathir said at the opening of the BioMalaysia Symposium 2002 today.

Dr Mahathir said the country's focus on biotechnology had largely been in the agriculture sector.

However, the weakness has been a lack of sharing of findings which made it hard for researchers to fund their projects and commercialise results.

"It remains for others to believe in the potential of their (researchers') results and be willing to invest large sums of money over a prolonged period before any returns can be expected.

"Researchers must therefore accept the need to share their discoveries with entrepreneurs and investors."

Dr Mahathir called for a formula to ensure that scientists get a fair return on their work.

"We must benefit fairly from the assets that God has bestowed on us. We should welcome collaboration in research under conditions which allow us a fair share of benefits," he said.

Speaking later, he said a formula for sharing should include agreements that state the rights of the local and foreign parties involved in the research.

"We will also ensure that our natural resources used in studies will not be taken out of the country and that research is done here."

On Malaysia's researchers, he said there were "very good, very focused" scientists who needed to be given more recognition.

"They will never be as well paid as CEOs or have luxury jets and yachts. But for them, their best reward is the results they achieve.

"However, this culture has not yet spread among those in our society."

Dr Mahathir also called for a sense of social obligation among researchers and biotech entrepreneurs, and not to become greedy like big drug companies.

Citing the makers of HIV/AIDS drugs as an example, he said these companies priced their drugs so high that the poor could not afford it, and prevented others from making the same drugs through proprietary rights and high royalties.

"Governments of poor countries are forced to protect these rights, and see their own people suffer for lack of treatment.

"There must be more transparency as to the cost and the recovery (of these companies). How long should a copyright be protected and what percentage of profit is legitimate and morally right?" Dr Mahathir said.

He also called for large biotech companies that produced genetically modified food to be responsible.

While GM food had great benefits for the world's starving millions, its long-term effects on people and the environment have not been determined.

"We should not test GM food on hapless people, we must expend a lot of money on verifying the (potential) harmful effects quickly," he said.

He said GM food should not be rejected based solely on the current "hysteria" of the anti-GM food lobby.

"If there is no basis to their claims, then GM food can solve a lot of problems in the world where people are starving."

Dr Mahathir also said there was a need for an enforcement agency and ethics panel to govern the biotechnology industry, and prevent the misuse of science for harmful ends.

"The ethics of the life sciences must be spelt out by the international community and enforcement agencies set up."