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PM: Only hi-tech agriculture can ensure food self-sufficiency

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KLUANG, Thurs. - The agriculture sector needs to undergo a revolution if the nation is to become self-sufficient in food production and exports, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

Opening the country's first large-scale integrated modern agriculture project here today, he said the Government would give its full support to any move to modernise agriculture.

He said the advancement of agriculture could help enhance the living standards of the people, particularly of the rural poor.

"But this is only possible if traditional farmers are willing to change their mindset and accept modern farming methods that promise high yields.

"High technology is not only for the manufacturing sector. Very little is said about hi-tech agriculture, which is possible through the use of bio-technology," he said.

Illustrating this point, he said a ciku fruit that weighs 500gm was only possible with the infusion of high technology.

He said to remain competitive with other food-producing countries in the region, Malaysia had no choice but to switch to hi-tech farming.

"That is why this project in Air Hitam and Kluang is so important for the country. It is a positive move in the right direction to boost our agriculture output and reduce our annual food import bill," he said at the launch of a greenfield commercial farming project in Kahang, about 20km from here.

Also present were Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Agriculture Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, his deputy Datuk Seri Mohd Shariff Omar, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng and Agriculture Ministry secretary-general Datuk Abi Musa Asa'ari Mohd Nor.

The project, spread over 3,459 hectares in three different locations, is an idea that was originally mooted by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and based on a master plan drawn up by the Royal Agriculture College in the United Kingdom.

Twenty companies are involved in the project. Of the number, four are into livestock breeding, with large-scale farms in Padang Hijau which started operations last September.

The others are involved in aqua-culture, vegetable and fruit farming at either the Ayer Hitam Agriculture Institute or the Veterinary Institute in Ayer Hitam.

Abdulah said the project could become a showcase of modern agriculture in the country when fully developed, adding that rural farmers involved in the project stood to benefit from higher incomes and improved standard of living.

"This is proof that the Government has not neglected rural development and the needs of the farming community," he said.

"High technology is imperative for the agriculture sector to grow, as is the case with manufacturing industries. We must also modernise small-scale farming and attract big companies to participate in the ventures," he said.

Abdullah said the country was endowed with fertile soil and vast tracks of land suitable for agriculture, which he added, was a blessing from Allah.

"We have all the natural resources. In fact, Malaysia is deemed as one with the richest in terms of bio-diversity in the region.

"We should, therefore, mobilise all our efforts to utilise the resources and ensure that it will bring greater wealth to our nation."

Abdullah urged the Agriculture Ministry to co-operate with all the State Governments to develop the sector extensively, adding that this would benefit rural folk, the majority of whom were farmers.

"It is necessary to have the right policies and programmes, but what is more important at the end of the day, is whether our farmers are successful."

The Prime Minister said the spillover from modernisation of agriculture was tremendous as this could lead to the development of a host of downstream processing factories and other small- and medium-scale industries.