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Dr M: Plans to set up research labs on diseases

BINTULU, Thurs. - The Government has decided to allocate funds to set up laboratories capable of conducting tests on diseases like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said lessons learnt from the SARS outbreak showed how vital it was for the Government and health authorities to respond speedily in identifying the virus, its causes and methods of transmission, developing the vaccine and measures to be carried out to contain the outbreak.

"This is something that we must be prepared to handle. In the future, there will be more of such diseases due to mutation of bacteria and viruses.

"We are going to face this kind of problem all the time, so we have to have a proper agenda or programme to deal with them," he said at a Press conference after opening the Petronas Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Complex near here.

Dr Mahathir was asked on the Government's ability and readiness to combat SARS which had claimed more than 500 lives and left thousands of others sick worldwide.

Dr Mahathir also said the world faced the possibility of being attacked by new drug-resistant diseases.

"Over the last ten years, we have seen HIV/AIDS, mad cow disease and now dengue. Although an old disease, it has become endemic.

"Now we have drug-resistant malaria, tuberculosis, so the world is faced with the possibility of being attacked by new drug-resistant diseases."

Taking a swipe against the superpowers, Dr Mahathir said instead of concentrating on research and finding ways to combat such diseases, they were more interested in developing new weapons.

"But of course the world spent billions of dollars perfecting the latest nuclear bomb so that they can kill more people ... saving people is not important (to them)."

Dr Mahathir was also asked on Singapore entering into a trade agreement with the United States, to which he replied foreign countries were free to do whatever they wanted.

Dr Mahathir, who had just come back from a two-month leave, was also asked whether he had obtained new ideas while on holiday that he would like to introduce before his retirement in October.

Replying in the affirmative, he said there were some new things he learnt while overseas that could be emulated, but added he could not do anything much in the next six months.

The Prime Minister also made a brief stopover in Miri.

Dr Mahathir later left for Kuala Lumpur.