

28/07/2003

Duty of feeding the nation

HIGHER productivity means better income and this applies not only in industry but in agriculture as well. Continuing rural poverty boils down to farmers not being able to earn enough for the labour they put in, due to inadequate technology, low investment or simply lack of initiative or effort. Improved productivity means the same output with fewer farmers, a task that has engaged the Government for years.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad aptly cited the example of the United States, where only five per cent of Americans living in rural areas produce food for the rest of the population and more. This is true for other industrialised countries as well. Our farmers should aspire to such a shift if Malaysia is to become a developed nation.

However, the methods, habits and mindset of our farmers need to change. They must think of farming as a commercial venture, be more enterprising, better prepared to save and invest in machinery and technology and less disposed to idle away the slack periods in crop cycles. The time between planting and harvesting can be used to develop cottage industries, for example. The Government has tried to help farmers develop this concept under the one-village-one-product programme but, lamentably, with little success.

A growing and urbanising population requires more food, which demands greater energy and creativity from the farming community. Without sufficient domestic output, more food will have to be imported, which not only upsets the trade balance but also erodes the competitiveness of local farmers. The traditional farming sector still has an important role in providing sustenance for rapid economic growth and the production of goods and services for the world market.

But are our farmers meeting the challenge? The Gerakan Daya Wawasan (Vision and Empowerment Movement), launched by the Prime Minister on Saturday, is the latest government effort to raise farm productivity not just by assistance and incentives but also by internal motivation. Food security continues to be a high priority. Its achievement will ultimately depend on the farmers themselves making the necessary effort to buck up.