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Foreign scientists must share findings

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DENGKIL, Tues. - Malaysia welcomes foreign biotechnology scientists and companies wishing to conduct research and development here but they must share their findings with the country.

"We have the right to share in whatever is derived from the research done into our biodiversity because the natural resources are ours," said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today.

He added that the research must not be done at the expense of the country or its environment.

"Malaysia's rich biodiversity, which includes its tropical rainforest, offers extensive opportunities for scientists to develop products of benefit to mankind.

"We want all scientists to respect the policy of the Government. We want to have all the resources tapped but not have the resources damaged forever.

"We love our forests and we do not want people to come here and just chop down trees or take away the resources for their own benefit. We believe in sharing and a win-win situation," Dr Mahathir said at the ground-breaking ceremony of Bio-Valley Malaysia here.

Pointing out instances where the natural resources of certain countries had been taken away, developed and successfully commercialised without the country of origin being rewarded, the Prime Minister said such exploitation should end.

At a Press conference later, Dr Mahathir said scientists and companies venturing into biotechnological research in Malaysia would be subject to certain conditions to prevent exploitation.

"Anybody coming here must enter into an agreement or undertaking that they will share their resources, and will not take everything out of this country. As you know it is easy just to take one flower out of the country and do research elsewhere.

"There was this case of an African flower taken out of Madagascar by foreign scientists who conducted research and who now claim exclusive rights over the product developed." That, Dr Mahathir said, was akin to piracy.

On interest in BioValley Malaysia, he said some scientists from China were already working with locals to conduct research on oil palm tree trunks.

BioValley Malaysia is located on a 200ha site south of Cyberjaya. Phase I is the development of an 80ha site.

Envisaged is a wide spectrum of biotechnology-related activities such as drug research and bio-processes operating on different platforms of technology.

BioValley Malaysia will lead the growth in this important industry by improving the integration of different players and leveraging the research and development capabilities.

It is also to consolidate all on-going biotechnology initiatives across the country and to assist, co-ordinate and promote the commercialisation of findings and products.

On private sector participation, Dr Mahathir said the Government would make available the macro resources in the country.

On the impact of new diseases, the Prime Minister said rapid action centres should be set up in every country as reactions to new threats were

haphazard and unco-ordinated.

He said SARS was an example where initially doctors did not know what they were dealing with and exposed themselves to the virus. Unfortunately, those who died of the disease were mostly hospital staff.

"We don't know how SARS is transmitted. We may wear masks but it may be infecting us through other means, so workers in such centres must be properly insulated.

"We are thinking about these things, and it involves a lot of money so rich countries should contribute towards this as such initiatives will save lives. But rich countries, as you know, spend hundreds of billions of dollars on developing weapons to kill people more effectively."