

Abdullah: Priority to safety, environs

Biotech risks must be based on facts

SAN FRANCISCO, Tues. — Biotechnology development should not come at the expense of public safety or the environment.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stressed that the assessment of risks presented by biotechnology should be based on facts and scientifically-based evidence and not on emotions or sensationalism.

Abdullah, who chaired the Biotechnology Roundtable Meeting 2005 attended by members of the international advisory panel, said Malaysia also recognised that biotechnology was a global race and that the country has its own competitive advantages and should not replicate strategies pursued by other countries.

Malaysia was advised to move quickly, balancing long-term efforts with initiatives that show results in the near term, he said.

He told a Press conference that, for instance, it was suggested that Malaysia leverage on its advantages in outsourcing and ICT as well as partner with research laboratories and pharmaceutical companies to help bring down the cost of drug development.

"The meeting emphasised that biotechnology is a marathon and not a sprint. It was pointed out that financiers need to understand the nature of biotechnology in order to make a fair assessment of the risks involved," Abdullah said.

On the issues touched at the meeting, the prime minister said it encompassed a broad-based dialogue on developing Malaysia's biotechnology sector as a

whole as well as focused discussions on agriculture biotechnology and health biotechnology.

He said the roundtable validated some of the Government's earlier thinking as well as provided new ideas.

Abdullah said the meeting was largely in agreement with respect to the areas already identified as strategic niches such as biotechnology research on palm oil and manufacturing of biomedical devices.

The meeting also presented other strategic areas such as biotechnology research on farm animals, especially in view of the increased crossover of diseases from animals to humans, he said.

He also said Malaysia needed to rapidly build its human capital in biotechnology, particularly in relation to scientists and bio-entrepreneurs.

The meeting also advised that opportunities for biotechnology workers needed to be enhanced to add to the human capital base and to reverse the brain drain.

In this regard, Abdullah said the upgrading of higher education institutions to become centres of excellence was recognised as a vital issue, and the need for strong research universities was identified as an important element in developing biotechnology clusters.

Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Dr Jamaludin Jarjis, Health Minister Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam were among those who attended the roundtable. — Bernama