

PM meets top guns of biotech firms

• From Syed Nazri in San Francisco

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MALAYSIA may see its biggest gains yet in the rapidly-growing biotechnology industry following Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's meeting with some of the biggest names in the business yesterday.

Abdullah, here on a private visit, met 15 of the top executives of biotechnology firms over lunch and seemed pleased that most were keen to invest in Malaysia.

It was part of a brief but significant appearance by Abdullah at the on-go-

ing Biotech 2004 Exhibition here, one that was seen as a clear signal of the Malaysian Government's support and commitment towards business in biotechnology.

The 15 bigwigs included Dr Mark Ahn (Hudson Health Science Centre president and CEO), Elliot Entis (Aqua Bounty Technologies Inc president and CEO), Dr Robert Fraley (Monsanto executive vice-president), Dr William Johnston (Inhibitex president and CEO), Jeremy Levin (Novartis Institutes head of strategic alliances), David Raisbeck (Cargill Inc vice-chairman), Dr Roger Wyse (Burrill and Co managing partner) and Craig Wheeler (Chiron BioPharm-

aceuticals president).

Abdullah told Malaysian journalists later that he was confident the firms would seriously consider investing in Malaysia as the industry had strong Government backing.

He said he took the opportunity to sell Malaysia as a place for them to expand their businesses and set up research and development facilities.

A few of the companies, he noted, had already established links with partners in Malaysia while the rest were expected to touch base soon.

"I also explained to them that biotechnology had great potential in Malaysia and it could be a catalyst for new growth areas in the country's

economy as well as a source of new wealth and income for the people," he added.

Abdullah said the growth in biotechnology would suit Malaysia's diversified economy well.

"Biotech is useful in many areas — agriculture, livestock farming, herbal industry and traditional and modern medicine.

"Its potential in the pharmaceutical industry is also unlimited," he said.

Abdullah, who earlier spent more than two hours visiting booths at the exhibition, said he was amazed by the products and potential of biotechnology.

Malaysia is one of the 59 countries taking part in the Bio 2004 convention and one of the 28 participating in the exhibition.

The country's delegation, comprising a mix of both government and private sector officials, is headed by Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis.

Meanwhile, *Bernama* reported that Abdullah's presence at the annual event was hailed by top corporate officials from American biotechnology firms.

They said it reflected his commitment to oversee the growth of the industry in Malaysia.

Covenant Business Development vice-president Peter Varney said: "It demonstrated enormous commitment on the part of Malaysia to this industry."

Biogen Idec Strategic Initiatives vice-president Gunther Winkler said: "It sends a fantastic signal not only to US biotech firms, but also those of the world that Malaysia is pro-business and not just open to business.

"Malaysia really regards doing business internationally and especially with the biotech community as the most important agenda.

"The Prime Minister is here speaking to us and this really sends a very important signal."