

PM: Focus on farming not a regressive step

• **By Sheridan Mahavera and Syed Umar Ariff**
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KOTA BARU: It's not a step backwards and certainly not at the expense of the other sectors such as manufacturing and information technology.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi gave this assurance yesterday as he spoke of the Government's drive to rejuvenate the agricultural sector and transform it into a growth engine.

This was also his answer to some critics who had questioned his administration's decision to inject RM11.4 billion into developing agriculture.

Abdullah said the manufacturing and ICT sectors were already self-sustaining and their growth was being propelled by their own momentum.

The Government, he said, did not have to direct their development as was done in the past but ensure that they received continuous support.

"People have told me that concentrating on agriculture is regressive as though the country is going backwards.

"But I told them many people depend on farming, planting and rearing for their income, so we must help them.

"The manufacturing and ICT sectors are already in fourth gear and they do not need us to push them anymore, but to ensure they continue to receive investment," Abdullah told a crowd of padi farmers in Padang Merdeka Jelor, near here.

He also announced a RM86.6 million allocation as cash aid to the 11,708 tobacco planters in the country to switch to other crops such as kenaf and cocoa.

Amounting to RM5,000 per family, it would be paid in three stages starting this year as part of the Government's efforts to wean the planters off tobacco which has been their sole source of income.

"We will attend to the tobacco planters and curers' problems and provide the necessary assistance. We hope they will benefit from the help," he said.

Tobacco growers face a bleak prospect once the country opens its markets in compliance with the Asean Free Trade Area, which comes into force in 2010.