

PM: INVEST IN LARGE-SCALE FARMING

Dr M impressed with op at Azerbaijan farm, wants Malaysian firms to emulate it



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THE Green Tech LLC greenhouse complex, located 20 minutes from here, is a model agriculture farm that has created jobs and provided the population with a steady income.

Owned by the Azersun Holdings Group, the farm, which grows environmentally-friendly vegetables, is part of a state programme to upgrade the socio-economic development of Baku

and its suburban settlements.

Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who visited the farm on Saturday, was impressed with its modern operations, which he said could be applied to farms in Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir had led the Malaysian delegation at the two-day 18th Summit of the Non-Alignment Movement that ended on Saturday. He had, on Friday, addressed delegates at the summit.

During a 40-minute tour of the farm, Dr Mahathir and his entourage were briefed on the farm's processes by Azersun vice-president Tahir Goozal. Azersun is the biggest conglomerate in Azerbaijan's food production, retail and farming sector. It is the republic's largest food producer and exporter.

The farm, which spans about 35ha, is equipped with advanced state-of-the-art equipment, including climate control systems, heat-shielding films, boiler equipment, heating and irrigation systems.

The farm, which uses coconut husk or coir imported from Malaysia as soil, produces more than 6,000 tonnes of vegetables, such as tomato, egg plant, cu-

cumber and chili annually. Organic fertiliser is applied and vegetable seedlings are pollinated by means of bee colonies, which is said to contribute to higher natural yields.

At a press conference before leaving for Turkmenistan for a two-day visit on Saturday night, Dr Mahathir said private firms and government-owned companies, such as Khazanah Nasional Bhd, should invest in large-scale fruit and vegetable farming to reduce the nation's food import bill, which is almost RM60 billion per year.

He said at present, major firms focused only on large-scale oil palm and rubber plantations, and their commodity prices were subject to market uncertainties. The Green Tech farm, he added, produced vegetables that were exported to Russia with lucrative returns.

"Fruit and vegetable farming has revenue potential, and our farmers should diversify and venture into mixed farming on a large scale.

"They can plant a variety of crops, fruit trees and vegetables, like tomato. They will have bigger capital and they can hire professionals to manage the estates.

"They can offer their produce for the export market and they will have a steady income."

On whether the government would encourage Khazanah to invest in the vegetable farming sector, Dr Mahathir said: "If Khazanah is keen, why not?"

"Khazanah can invest, but the private sector needs to get involved as well."

He said the private sector's involvement was important for such a venture because large investments were needed if the Green Tech model was to be applied.

Earlier, during a meeting with the Malaysian diaspora here, he encouraged students who had studied agriculture to use their expertise and skills, and not let them go to waste.

"They have the skills. They should go and work for the private sector. They are professionals and they can impart their knowledge in the farming sector."

Besides the Green Tech farm, Dr Mahathir also visited the site of Yanar Dag, or the "burning mountain", an area where natural gas fire blazes continuously on a hillside at the Absheron Peninsula near the Caspian Sea.

He paid a courtesy visit to Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev at the Zagulba Presidential Palace.

At the brief 20-minute meeting, Aliyev praised Dr Mahathir's speech during the general debate at the NAM Summit.

Dr Mahathir was then taken on a tour of the Petronas office here.

Petronas' presence among the oil and gas giants in Azerbaijan had changed the landscape of the oil and gas industry in the republic.

Prior to Petronas' opening here, the industry was monopolised by Western companies, such as British Petroleum, Chevron and TOTAL Statoil.

Petronas, one of Fortune Global 500's largest corporations, started operations in Azerbaijan after the opening of the Malaysian embassy here in 2014. Petronas had acquired a 15.5 per cent equity in the Shah Deniz 11 Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) from Norway's Statoil for US\$2.25 billion.

As a stakeholder in the PSA, Petronas owns a 15.5 per cent equity in the South Caucasus Pipeline Company Ltd and 12.4 per cent equity in Azerbaijan Gas Supply Company Ltd.