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Abdullah: Tackle global food crisis with urgency

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WITH hundreds of millions of dollars, yen, yuan, euro and even tens of millions of ringgit wiped off the stock market over the last fortnight, it is easy to be distracted by the panic and forget the real concerns facing the world.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi yesterday sent out a timely reminder — that it is the scale of the global food crisis that world leaders must attend to, urgently.

At the Asia-Europe Meeting session on “Food security, disaster preparedness and management”, Abdullah said 850 million people worldwide faced hunger on a daily basis — far exceeding the estimate made in 1974 that 650 million people would be in such dire straits by the year 2010.

“We might have lost sight of this basic and yet critical sector of the economy, especially when alluring opportunities present themselves in the services, manufacturing and technology sectors,” he said.

“The present turmoil in the global financial sector, energy crisis and climate change has contributed to making the situation



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more critical.”

The prime minister pointed to the fact that agriculture land was being gobbled up to produce crops for biofuel, instead of food.

“Seven years ago, only one million hectares of land were utilised for biofuel production. Today, 25 million hectares of land capable of producing about 100 million tonnes of food crops are being used annually for the production of biofuel,” he said.

Citing corn as an example, he said ordinary Mexicans were suffering as the price of this staple food had soared because it was being used by the US to create ethanol.

Malaysia is, however, using waste oil palm fibres to produce biofuel. “We must find a proper



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balance between the use of scarce resources for food and for biofuel purposes,” he said.

Abdullah cautioned that a balance must be found to use scarce land for food and biofuel production, as otherwise the world would face a double whammy — food

shortage and high food prices.

“The international food price index increased by nine per cent in 2006, accelerated to 40 per cent in 2007 and to 57 per cent in March 2008.”

The huge price hike has led to unrest in more than 30 countries and Abdullah warned that food security goals could not be achieved without an increase in food production capacity and a renewed interest in agriculture and its development.

To avoid national food supply emergencies and crisis, Abdullah said every country should strive to balance between local production and imports.

Citing Malaysia, he said the country had initiated several measures to increase domestic supply, especially rice. The measures included greater investments in agriculture infrastructure, pest and disease control, and the use of quality seeds and biotechnology.

Abdullah called on the international community to focus on helping developing countries improve their capacity to feed their people.