Enhancing food security

Malaysia’s food import bill

- 2009: RM26.28b
- 2010: RM34.35b
- 2011: RM30.19b
- 2012 (January-July): RM20.29b
‘We’re ready for global food crisis’

VARIOUS PROJECTS: Malaysia has plans to deal with it

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The government’s efforts to increase food production is bearing fruit, even as Malaysia prepares to face a worldwide food crisis next year.

With the Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Ministry ensuring that Malaysia has food to tide itself over during this period, several short- and long-term plans have been formulated to deal with the problem.

Although the rapid expansion of the economy over the past two decades has resulted in a change of food consumption patterns, the government is confident Malaysia can weather the crisis.

The ministry told the New Straits Times yesterday that it had drawn up strategies to increase food production and ensure that food supplies were maintained.

These include projects such as the Permanent Food Production Park, Aquaculture Industrial Zone and agro-based industry development projects.

In padi production, the ministry said the annual average yield of padi in the country’s rice-bowl region of Kedah had increased from 2.35 million tonnes in 2008 to 2.46 million tonnes in 2010.

Some granary areas, it said, recorded high productivity at 5.5 tonnes per hectare per season.

“The rice stock pile has been increased to ensure sufficient supply during a food crisis.

“The production of other agricultural goods, including fruits, vegetables, livestock and fisheries products, has recorded increases to cater for the increasing domestic demand.

“Through the National Agrofood Policy, the ministry aims to tackle food security issues by ensuring an adequate food supply, the development of the agro-food industry into a competitive industry and increasing the income level of agro-entrepreneurs.”

The Guardian newspaper last month reported that the United Nations had warned of next year’s worldwide food crisis and that the collapse of the global food supply was inevitable.

It said world grain reserves were so dangerously low that severe weather in the United States and other food-exporting countries could trigger a hunger crisis next year.

The newspaper said failing harvests in the US, Ukraine and other countries this year had eroded reserves to their lowest level since 1974.

The US, which has experienced record heat waves and droughts this year, holds in reserve a historically low 6.5 per cent of the maize that it expects to consume next year.

The ministry said Malaysia overcame the 2008 food crisis by increasing rice production and stockpiles. “The increase in food prices because of inadequate food supply is a serious matter, as evidenced by the world food crisis in 2008, which was the worst in terms of magnitude, duration and number of commodities that increased in prices.

“This phenomenon is expected to continue for the next 10 years.”

At the second inter-sessional meeting of the Global Science and Innovation Advisory Council on Thursday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said the threat of food shortage arising from natural disasters, soil quality deterioration and other factors were becoming real.

He said global warming and climate change had made agriculture and food security critical issues for Malaysia as well as for the region.
Higher padi yield, thanks to good practices

ALOR STAR: Padi yields in Kedah and Perlis have increased significantly following the adoption of good agricultural practices introduced 12 years ago.

Padi can produce up to 600,000 tonnes per season from 96,000ha in both states.

In 2000, the areas under the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (Mada) yielded only about 450,000 tonnes per season.

Mada general manager Datuk Abdul Rahim Saleh said the increase was because the concept emphasised on planting techniques, including the use of quality seedlings.

"Before the concept was introduced, the average yield of some 50,000 farmers here hovered around 4.7 tonnes per hectare.

"For this season, we are expecting farmers to produce 6.4 tonnes."

Other contributing factors included the introduction of a centralised padi estate programme, outlined under the National Key Result Areas to create ample rice stockpiles and raise the living standards of padi farmers in 2010.

Mada is also targeting to convert some 50,000ha of padi fields into estate-style systems by 2020, as well as increase the yield to eight tonnes per hectare.

A survey by the International Trade and Industry Ministry revealed that the processed food industry contributed significantly to the country's economy.

Production of kerepek (crisps) contributed the highest in value with RM70 million in 2010 followed by traditional food types at RM54 million.

Projects under the Permanent Food Production Park of the National Agrofood Policy have managed to produce 40 to 50 tonnes of vegetables daily.

At the same time, the aquaculture industry is becoming economically more important.

A report from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations said Malaysia's aquaculture industry had succeeded in producing high-value species for the domestic and export markets.
Mole in the hills

The authorities are aware of illegal land clearing in Cameron Highlands but efforts to act against the culprits have been stymied by leaks in the District Office and poor enforcement.

>See reports by SIMON KHOO, ONG HAN SEAN and ISABELLE LAI on Page 4.
Devamany: Land-clearing rampant in Camerons

KUANTAN: Illegal land-clearing within Cameron Highlands has reached an intolerable level, Datuk S.K. Devamany said.

“Yes, it is true. Illegal land-clearing activities are happening quite rampantly in the highlands. It has reached an intolerable level. We need a stricter enforcement and a stronger legislative framework to address the issue,” said Devamany, who is also the Cameron Highlands MP and Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department.

He said the Land Office should initiate creative methods to nab the culprits instead of just seizing the heavy machinery without making any arrests.

He said in most cases the culprits got off with just a fine, resulting in them getting bolder in repeating such activities openly.

“Enforcement has to be beefed up. There should be officers working during weekends to keep tabs on the situation.

“Without resolute efforts, more land will be lost and this will reflect badly on the state government,” he said.

When asked whether the state government was issuing too many Temporary Occupation Licences (TOLs) to open up agriculture farms, Devamany said the matter should be investigated.

It is learnt under the guidelines for TOL, only 0.8ha of land is allotted and no usage of heavy machinery is allowed for land-clearing.

But due to lack of enforcement, permit holders use such equipment to flatten more that the allotted land plot.

There have been claims that in some cases up to 20.2ha were being cleared illegally.

In addition to this, clearing work is supposed to be done during weekdays but the lack of checks have resulted in such activities being carried out on weekends as well and mostly at night.

Regional Environmental Association of Cameron Highlands (Reach) president R. Ramakrishnan said while the state government was responsible for issuing TOLs, the district office was in charge of issuing permits for land-clearing.

“The district office must get technical reviews from agencies, such as the Department of Environment and Drainage and Irrigation Department.

“We believe that this process is not followed,” he said, adding that all TOL holders should be made known to the public to ensure transparency and accountability.
‘It is an inside job’
Insiders leaking info to land-clearing culprits, says DO

By SIMON KHOO and ONG HAN SEAN
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KUANTAN: The authorities are finding it hard to catch the people involved in clearing land illegally in Cameron Highlands – because district office personnel are in cahoots with the culprits.

District officer Datuk Ahmad Daud made this startling admission when commenting on the rampant land clearing in the Blue Valley of the Cameron Highlands.

Ahmad said his officers had been monitoring land clearing and had conducted raids "when we receive reliable information" of such activity.

"However, we suspect someone from within is leaking information to the culprits, resulting in unsuccessful raids.

What made him all the more suspicious was that the culprits had "retrieved" four of the nine items of heavy machinery seized during a raid when no one was guarding the site.

"I will need to clean up my house in order before launching a full scale operation to nab those involved," he added.

Ahmad was responding to The Star’s front page report yesterday that land was being cleared rampantly in forest reserve areas in the Cameron Highlands, causing concern to residents.

The residents complained that their source of water was being affected and feared that the exposed slopes would suffer from erosion in bad weather, triggering a repeat of the August 2011 tragedy in which seven people died and several houses were destroyed in an Orang Asli settlement in Kampung Sungai Rull.

Ahmad said he would organise a brainstorming session to come up with solutions to address the matter conclusively.

He said it was difficult to keep tabs on illegal activity because the culprits were believed to be carrying out their work at night and during weekends.

"It is not easy to just go in and nab them as we need to trek deep into the jungle," he said.

In KUANTAN, Pahang Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob said no new temporary occupation licences (TOL) had been issued for development in the Cameron Highlands.

He added that the state government’s policy was for old TOLs to be renewed and not for new licences to be issued.

"The duration for the TOLs has been extended to three years, which means TOL holders do not have to renew the licence every year like before," Adnan said.

"So I just do not understand why some people are complaining that they cannot renew their TOL," Adnan said after attending a dialogue session with federal department heads yesterday.

He also said the encroachment of state government land was “quite normal”, adding that he had asked the district office to act on the matter.

Going bare: Regional Environmental Association of Cameron Highlands (REACH) president R. Ramakrishnan pointing towards the hill during the site visit. (Inset) State land being illegally cleared at Mersun Valley near Brinchang.

EIA report needed for slope clearing, says REACH

By ISABELLE LAI
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CAMERON HIGHLANDS: The Regional Environmental Association Cameron Highlands (REACH) wants a detailed environmental impact assessment (EIA) report done before any steep slope is cleared for agriculture.

Its president R. Ramakrishnan said many of the slopes cleared in the past six months were classified as class three and four, which means that they are above 30 degrees and posed a high risk of soil erosion and landslides.

He said that according to Department of Agriculture statistics, there was no more suitable land for agriculture, which should be located below 25 degrees.

“What is available now is all more than 25 degrees. Continuing such land clearing will be gambling with our lives,” he said.

He stressed the need for a thorough study to see whether agriculture could be done on such steep slopes, as it was clear that “the damage done to the environment was too great”.

Describing the land clearing over the past six months as “drastic and shocking”, he said the high rate of silting also had a big impact on the Sultan Abu Bakar Dam in the area.

He said the loose soil from the land clearing ended up being washed into the dam waters, causing huge damage to the turbines.

The steeper the slope, the higher the silt build-up.

“This can result in the shutting down of the dam.

“De-silt the dam costs a huge amount of money,” he warned.

Ramakrishnan said the current silting rate in Cameron Highlands was 200 tonnes per ha per year, according to a study conducted by the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Mardi).

He said that even if a particular piece of land had a legitimate permit, the clearing size would be confined to an area not exceeding 0.8ha as stipulated in the temporary operating licence.

“But in reality, the areas being cleared are sometimes 10 or 20 times the size that is legally permitted, as everyone going there can see for themselves,” he said, adding that he had sent a letter on Aug 13 to Pahang Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission on the land clearing.

He also said that illegal land clearing was being carried out in Mersun Valley, Brinchang and Kampung Taman Seda.

The Star reported yesterday that the District Office conducted a raid last weekend and seized heavy machinery, including backhoes and excavators, in response to locals’ complaints of rampant land clearing.

The Star, Oct 10, 2012
Highland blues

Land is being cleared rampantly in forest reserve areas of the Cameron Highlands, causing concern to nearby residents. They complain that their source of water is being affected and fear that the exposed slopes will face erosion in bad weather.

> See Page 12 for reports by SIMON KHOO

Going bare: One of the reserve areas in Blue Valley which local residents claim is being illegally cleared.
The hills are not alive

Residents: Land clearing rampant in Camerons since last four months

By SIMON KHOO
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CAMERON HIGHLANDS: Rampant land clearing is being carried out in several forest reserve areas here, according to nearby residents.

Responding to their complaints, the District Office conducted a raid and seized heavy machinery, including backhoes and excavators.

Residents said tree-felling was especially rampant in the last four months.

R. Subramaniam, 51, feared that the exposed slopes would suffer from erosion during bad weather.

Tanah Rata assemblyman Datuk Ho Yip Kap said land clearing was rampant, but he did not know if it was illegal.

He was, however, worried about the consequences.

"With the rainy season approaching, we do not want landslides and rivers sitting up," he said.

Cameron Highlands MP Datuk S.K. Devamany said illegal land clearing was rampant in the constituency, and all parties should meet and come up with strategies to address the situation.

In an immediate response, Pahang Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Ahmad Yaakob said he had instructed Cameron Highlands' district officer to check on the claims.

"If it is true (that land in forest reserve areas are being cleared), I want the relevant authorities to resolve the matter as soon as possible," he said.

District officer Datuk Ahmad Daud said a site in Blue Valley was raided three weeks ago and heavy machinery was seized.

He added: "The culprits carry out their work at night, and we are short of manpower. They clear land deep inside the forest reserve, and when our officers reach the site, they have long gone."

Ahmad said some areas of the forest reserve were under the Forestry Department's jurisdiction, adding that "we will act if illegal activities are detected on state land." Regional Environmental Association Cameron Highlands president R. Ramakrishnan said he had submitted a letter to Adnan, complaining about the land clearing on Aug 13, and to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission. He believed that most of the clearings were illegal.

Even if permits had been issued in some cases, the conditions were not adhered to in accordance with the Land Conservation Act 1960, he said.

Ramakrishnan claimed that besides Blue Valley, illegal land clearing activities were also happening in Mensun Valley, Brinchang, Tanah Rata and Kampung Taman Sedia.

‘Camerons already affected by land clearing’

PETALING JAYA: Land clearing activity will bring a long-term blow to the environment, said the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS).

Its head of communications Andrew Sebastian said massive land clearing in forest areas was hastening the degradation of the country's biodiversity.

"Forests play an immediate service to the area by providing oxygen and clean water. When it is cleared for agriculture or development, its natural surrounding will be changed permanently," Sebastian said.

Among the effects of land clearing were soil erosion, deteriorating river and water quality and loss of flora, he said.

"It would also cost more to produce and transport clean water and to produce electricity as sediment in the water would affect the power turbines," he added.

"MNS has recorded micro climatic changes in the area due to continued earthworks. The overall temperature in the highlands has increased. There are also more mosquitoes, which naturally do not inhabit highland areas," Sebastian noted.

In August 2011, seven people were killed and homes destroyed in a landslide in an settlement in Kampung Sungai Rui in Cameron Highlands.

Authorities said that land clearing and earth works near the settlement for a townhouse development could have contributed to the disaster.

Last Thursday, Regional Environmental Association Cameron Highlands president R. Ramakrishnan sent an open letter to the press, highlighting the unabated land clearing activity that is still going on.

"It has now reached the heart of Tanah Rata bordering the forestry department, near the army camp, local council building, golf course, behind the hotel, behind Mardi and near Strawberry Park Resort," said Ramakrishnan.

The Star, Oct 9, 2012