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Food deficit 'unlikely to change'

PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia's food deficit, which was RM9.7 billion last year, is not expected to improve due to the higher price of fuel and commodities.

Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed said though the government had taken steps to keep prices low, Malaysia was too dependent on essential imported items like wheat, corn and animal feed.

The deficit in 2006 was RM8.5 billion. The government's goal of slashing the deficit bill to about RM1.2 billion by 2010 is still far off the mark.

"I don't foresee the deficit changing this year because food prices are still high and we depend a lot on imports. We have no alternatives for some of these imported food such as



wheat and corn and other farm inputs like animal feed," Mustapa said after launching a seminar on strategies for food security.

During the seminar, the ministry together with Universiti Putra Malaysia and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia, are to formulate strategies

for the government to alleviate food security issues.

Among the topics Mustapa said the seminar should look at was the need for cooperation between governments to solve the food crisis, increasing the capacity, skills and technology of local food producers, enhancing research and development, and engaging more private sector initiatives in agriculture.

"We must bring back the 'glamour' to agriculture to make it attractive to the private sector and to youth."

On the effects of a food crisis, Mustapa said the poor would be the worst hit and that higher prices would reduce their purchasing power, putting other needs like education and healthcare out of their reach.