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> FOOD PRODUCTION

Hi-tech farms the answer

THE 50 per cent increase in the international price of rice over the past two months and the possibility of further increases unless supplies increase ("Najib: No plans to increase price of local rice" — NST, April 1) is indeed food for thought.

Most disturbingly for Malaysia, which is only 60 per cent self-sufficient, rice may soon be unavailable at any price as major exporters such as Vietnam hang on to their supplies to protect their own population. The Philippines is now in a desperate situation and is unable to import the 500,000 tonnes of rice it needs to prevent starvation.

Malaysia's very efficient chicken, egg and other food industries provide a major source of protein for the population but are totally dependent on imported corn.

Half our carbohydrate consumption comes from imported wheat.

Both of these cereals have doubled in price over the last year. There's no end in sight to this hyperinflation and world stocks are at their lowest levels in 40 years. Soon, wheat and corn, like rice, may be unavailable on world markets.

I have been warning about this kind of situation for years. At a national conference on



The worldwide shortage of rice supplies owing to such factors as drought and less available land for agriculture has caused prices to rise, particularly imported rice.

"Bio-Industry: The Future for Malaysia" held in March 2002, my warnings calling for an Emergency Food Committee to boost Malaysian hi-tech food production, especially in rice, beef, goat and sheep meat and milk, fell on deaf ears.

Malaysia, with its relatively small population, is still dependent on imports, generally from less developed countries, for 50 per cent of its food.

The cause of the hyperinflation in basic food commodities is the world economy, which ran into difficulties in July last year. That is the harsh reality.

Malaysia needs to immediately set up a powerful Emergency Food Committee to implement a crash science and

engineering programme to boost local food production using hi-tech methods, not the backyard farming Malaysia is now practising.

The universities, the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Mardi) and entrepreneurs have developed solutions but they are being implemented at a snail's pace, if at all.

For example, the widespread introduction of the practical rice irrigation method developed by Universiti Putra Malaysia would greatly increase the yield per hectare and could soon make Malaysia self-sufficient in rice.

Similarly, Mardi has developed sweet-potato farming which could be rapidly scaled

up on the bris soils of the east coast.

To become self-sufficient in protein is much more difficult and we need to think out of the box.

Malaysia has a hidden food resource which, if immediately harnessed, may create the miracle we need. The warm conditions in Malaysia, combined with a plentiful supply of rain, sunshine and naturally high carbon dioxide levels, provide the perfect environment for the world's highest production of biomass in the form of trees, plants and, more importantly, grass.

Cattle, sheep, goats and even rabbits can be fed grass and mass-produced in Malaysia but not by traditional

grazing, which has proved disappointing over the last 50 years.

A large grass farm has been established in Pahang and 300 high-yielding milch cows are on their way from Australia. They will be fed cut grass to establish an ultra-modern dairy farm potentially five times more productive per hectare compared with the best New Zealand dairy farms.

Two glasses of milk per person per day, or its equivalent as butter, cheese and yoghurt, will supply the needed protein intake when supplemented with a normal fish diet.

To scale up such dairy farms, and also similar hi-tech cattle, sheep, goat and even rabbit farms, Malaysia has plenty of agricultural land.

Shocks like sudden food shortages are now to be expected on all fronts, including loss of our manufactured exports, as the world economy goes through a period of difficulty. Only a rapid return to the level of science and technology that got man on the moon can now save the population. There are no other alternatives.

MOHD PETER DAVIS
 Institute of Advanced Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia