

"Time to revisit food security issue"

KUALA LUMPUR: The Covid-19 pandemic coupled with the Eastern European conflict and climate change have put the country's food security at risk.

The situation has increased the country's dependency on food imports, which rose to RM55.4 billion in 2020 from RM51.4 billion the year before.

The **Department of Statistics' Supply and Utilisation Accounts Selected Agricultural Commodities 2016-2020** recorded several food items with a self-sufficiency ratio of less than 100 per cent due to Covid-19 curbs.

The Keluarga Malaysia administration under caretaker Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob's leadership had rolled out several measures and initiatives on food security, including setting up food security committees at the state and district levels.

The move is to ensure the National Food Security Policy Action Plan 2012-2025 would be implemented by the federal and state governments in a synergistic manner to strengthen national food security.

Malaysian Institute of Economic Research senior research fellow Dr Shankaran Nambiar said the increase in the national food import bill was detrimental to the country's economy.

"The high food import bill is among the factors contributing to the declining ringgit.

"Since many of our food items are imported, the cost of living has been eroded, adding to the challenging circumstances faced by the people."

Third World Network executive director Chee Yoke Lin concurred with Nambiar on the country's high dependency on food imports to meet domestic consumption.

She cited the United States International Trade Administration's country commercial guides, which stated that Malaysia's agricultural sector still heavily relies on imports for many key products, including wheat, rice, protein meal, dairy products, beef and most deciduous and citrus fruit.

"Malaysia's imports are not just fresh and processed food, but also agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, weedicides, livestock feed (increasingly genetically engineered feedmeal) and even chicks bred for laying eggs."

Nambiar said the pandemic has taught Malaysia a lesson on prioritising food security.

"The (country's) older (economic) model argued that Malaysia should concentrate on its comparative advantage.

"Export-oriented manufacturing was accorded priority, neglecting the agriculture sector.

"As a consequence, food security was not a priority. We have to revisit the issue of food security and give it more importance."

He said Malaysia should emulate Thailand, which takes agriculture seriously.

"State governments should place more emphasis on agricultural cultivation.

"The agriculture sector has to be modernised and made more attractive to the youth.

"This could be achieved by encouraging the use of technology in agriculture and making agriculture more attractive to work in."

Chee said there was a lack of policies and financing to support ecological farming and for more land to be used for food production.

"For a start, state governments that control land and natural resources must have a rational policy that prioritises food production.

"The federal government needs to stop imposing top-down policies that have no understanding of long-term farming that works with nature rather than against."

She called on the government to appreciate farmers, especially small farmers who provide food security at the family and community levels.

"With the right support and policies, small farmers can help the government ensure and strengthen food security at the national level."

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/11/849762/time-revisit-food-security-issue>