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RM60 BILLION FOOD IMPORT BILL

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KUALA SELANGOR: Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi has called for collaboration between the private sector and relevant ministries and agencies in ensuring food security in the country.

He said this during the launch of British American Tobacco (BAT) Malaysia Bhd's national expansion of its Beyond Benih programme, a food security initiative through community gardens.

Zahid said programmes such as BAT Malaysia's Beyond Benih was a good step to address the issue of food security.

"We currently rely on import-

ing produce from overseas, which is worth close to RM60 billion a year. Our soil is fertile and despite the high initial start-up cost for growing our own produce, in the long run, this could help reduce our dependence on imported produce.

"All quarters from the private sector and the government should work together and not work in silos to ensure food security to help the people."

Zahid, who is also rural and regional development minister, said the Beyond Benih programme was in line with the Madani Economy framework,

which aims to eradicate hardcore poverty.

"The programme by BAT Malaysia is a beacon. It realises the aspirations of the Madani Economy initiative in its efforts to curb hardcore poverty."

Zahid also welcomed BAT Malaysia to collaborate with Felcra Bhd in developing the under-utilised and unutilised lands.

"Felcra has 230,000ha of land nationwide which includes farms and padi fields. Negotiations with BAT Malaysia to use up the land could help 107,000 families. This collaboration will involve Felcra settlers."

The Beyond Benih programme, which is a collaboration involving BAT Malaysia, the Agriculture Department and the residents associations of the selected communities, aims to drive commitment towards sustainable livelihoods where communities can grow their own produce using good agricultural practices.

It will allow participants to sell their harvest at a lower cost to communities in the area.

The programme has completed two gardens, one each in Shah Alam and Tanjung Karang, with more expected to be launched across the country.