



P2
A taste of 'Eataly'

P10
Illegal immigrants are heroes in 'Machete'



MECHANICAL transplanting of rice seedlings on the padi trial planting site.



LEVELLING the land for the padi trial planting in Sekuduk-Chupak.



A FARMER threshing padi on his farm. PHOTOS: ADELINE LIONG/ COURTESY OF CERIA AGRICULTURE SERVICES SDN BHD

>> *Second of a four-part series*

Helping Sarawak to produce more rice

BY ADELINE LIONG

IN Sekuduk-Chupak, a wet padi planting scheme in Siburan, Kuching Division, each hectare of land yields about two to three tonnes of padi each season.

Since there are 100 hectares of padi land in Sekuduk-Chupak, 200 to 300 tonnes of padi are harvested every season.

With the farmers practising double-cropping, 400 tonnes of padi are harvested each year. The first padi planting season in the area is from May to August while the second planting season is from October to February.

Businessman Thomas Hii Tiong Kong strongly believes Sekuduk-Chupak can increase its rice yield as well as extend its padi land with the right approaches. "With the right approaches, the farmers can easily gather 600 tonnes of padi each harvesting season," said the managing director of Ceria Group, a private contractor which is currently using six combine harvesters to help the farmers harvest their crops.

The Ceria Group is an agricultural infrastructure development contractor incorporated in July 2009. Hii formed the company

with three other keen individuals, namely, Datu Dr Hatta bin Solih, Dato Affandi @Affendie bin Tahir and Vincent Lee Wei Gia. Subsequently, Patrick Song joined the team to form Ceria Agriculture Services Sdn Bhd.

Harvesting is a laborious task for most of the 140 padi farmers who are not only ageing but also face shortage of labour.

Thanks to the combine harvesters, the farmers now take just one day, instead of one whole month, to harvest an acre of padi land.

The speedy harvests are good for the farmers. Besides getting better quality crops and higher yields, they have more time to prepare their land for the next planting season.

Ceria Agriculture Services Sdn Bhd charges the farmers RM450 per hectare for the harvesting. The machines are rented from the Farmers' Organisation and made available to Ceria through the assistance of the Agriculture Department.

Hii, former general manager of a padi mini estate in Bintangor, Sibuan Division, believes farm mechanisation is the key to greater rice production in Sekuduk-Chupak as well as the entire state.

"Ten years ago, Sekuduk-

Chupak was a thriving padi growing area. There were 236 hectares of padi land. Now, many of the farms are sprouting weeds," he pointed out.

"Currently, we are only helping with the harvests. The farmers are only tasting the goodness of mechanisation at harvesting time and not throughout the padi planting process."

Ceria, he said, was keen to provide the full spectrum of farm mechanised services including land levelling works, land improvement works, field planting, manuring and maintenance, to all padi farmers in the state.

"It's so simple. People want to make money. If the farmers can increase their padi yields from two tonnes each to eight tonnes, they will make money. When the farmers make money, Ceria also makes money. It is a win-win situation."

"In the process, we are also helping Sarawak to achieve its goal of becoming self-sufficient in rice," he said.

Describing himself as "a businessman who thrives on competition", Hii, however, stressed that if Sarawak padi farmers wanted to make money, they must have access to all the government subsidies, like their counterparts in

Semenanjung Malaysia.

Besides harvesting six to eight tonnes of padi per hectare per season, the farmers in Semenanjung Malaysia were also living in better and bigger houses, he said.

"The padi farmers there are rich and selling rice at good prices."

"They are getting all the government help they need through subsidies," Hii added.

He explained that the government was providing as many as 12 subsidies for the padi farmers.

Quoting a paper delivered at this year's National Rice Conference held in Lumut, Perak, he said that the Malaysian government spent RM458,148,629 on the Paddy Price Subsidy from 2006 to 2008.

During the period, Sarawak padi farmers, however, received a paltry RM2,022,215 compared to RM229,724,833 received by the padi farmers in Kedah.

The objectives of the subsidy, which started in early 1980, are to increase productivity, to reduce cost of production and encourage farmers to produce more rice. 145,000 farmers registered for the subsidy from 2006 to 2008. They were paid RM248.10/MT when they sold their paddy to Padiberas Nasional Berhad (Bernas) and registered millers.

"Why are our farmers not benefiting from these subsidies?" asked Hii.

"Such incentives at the federal and state levels are useful for our smallholders," he said.



THOMAS HII showing a packet of Bajong rice from Lubok Nibong, Saratok.

Hii wants to make padi planting more open and attract more young people to the industry.

"There is big potential in padi planting. It is a meaningful venture. You're producing stable food for everybody."

"Rice is important to Sarawak. According to the official government figures, we are importing 70 percent of our rice. Unofficially, I think we are importing about 90 percent of it."

Hii urged those keen on padi planting in Sarawak to rent their neighbours' land. "Let us plant padi for you. Let us be your farm mechanised services provider."

"Padi planting is not rocket science. As long as you do the right things, you can get high yields from the land," insisted Hii, who was formerly general manager of a padi mini estate in Bintangor, Sibuan Division.

At the height of its operation, the mini estate, a joint venture between the Farmers

Organisation and the private sector, grew rice on 1,000 hectares of land and produced as much as four to five tonnes of padi a hectare.

According to Hii, coordination is the key to managing a modern padi farm.

"Ideally, only one variety of rice should be planted in each area. Different rice varieties have different characteristics and different water and fertiliser requirements. They also ripen at different times. "At the moment, all varieties of rice are being planted in one area. This adds to the headaches of managing a padi farm."

He pointed out that planting the same variety of rice at the same time in the same area would translate to lower costs of operations and higher yields and more returns for the farmers.

"It will be good if we have one rice variety to represent an area. In the past, Biris rice used to come from Simunjan, Bario rice from Bario and Bajong rice from Lubok Nibong in Saratok," he said.

Meanwhile, 15 hectares of land have been set aside at Sekuduk-Chupak by the Agriculture Department to test the impact of mechanisation and proper management on rice production.

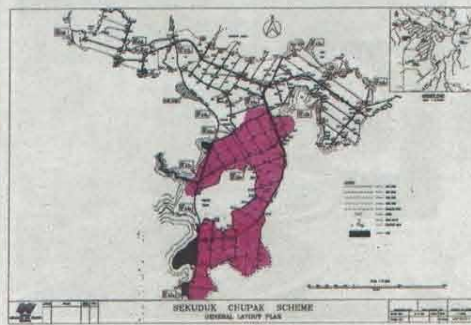
"It is a model for rice planting in Sarawak," explained Hii. He believes with farm mechanisation, proper management and government assistance in the form of subsidies and proper drying facilities, padi farmers in the state can produce more rice and make "tonnes of money".

Now, everyone is looking forward to the results of the experiment.

If the project succeeds, it will certainly encourage more padi farmers to go for mechanisation and more people to plant padi.



PADI drying in the sun at Sekuduk-Chupak.



CERIA Agriculture Services Sdn Bhd's contract harvesting area in the Sekuduk-Chupak scheme.