

Mahathir on language and nation-building

N.S.T. 2/1/77

DR M: HAVING ONE LANGUAGE WILL LEAD TO UNITY WITH NO PREJUDICES

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The nation-building programme of a developing country should include language planning to fortify the status of its national language, Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Such planning would also enable the country's national language to be a scientific and academic language while strengthening its education system, he said.

He was opening the fourth conference of Asian Association on National Languages (ASANAL) at the University of Malaya this morning.

About 70 language and other experts from the five Asean countries, India and Jordan are attending the six-day conference. Experts from Britain, France, the United States, West Germany, Canada and Australia are also attending.

Dr. Mahathir said that if the people could be educated in one language instead of being placed in a variety of moulds with different languages as the media of instruction, the result would be a united nation consisting of people who did not have unfounded prejudices against one another.

Language planning, if carried out systematically, could also bring the nation closer to foreign developments in

"The so-called incapability of a language arises not from the nature of the language itself but from the opportunities possible for it to be used as an academic or scientific language as well as from the attitude of the citizens of the country whether they wished to use their own language in this particular context," he said.

If the people had a strong determination to elevate the status of their language and not just leave it as one suitable only for interaction at the market place, then the language could become well-suited for use in any field.

He said language planning could include various programmes like systematic teaching of language and coining of scientific terms, standardisation of spellings, and the compilation of dictionaries.

The writing of books in the national language by academicians and scientists would also provide scientific and intellectual food for the people and assist in the development of the language as a living language.

Earlier, the head of the University of Malaya's Department of Malay Studies, Prof. Ismail Hussein, said that implementation of the national language as the medium of instruction in secondary schools and universities was no longer a political problem.

opt for English for their cultural and intellectual expressions, using the national language only in their jobs," he said.

The chairman of the organising committee, Dr. Asmah Haji Omar, hoped the conference would lead to a realisation that development of a national language was not the responsibility of the linguists alone but also the responsibility of all citizens.

The conference, therefore, would not look at language solely as an object of study but would also study its role and contribution in nation-building and development of the populace.

The conference's theme is *National Language as a medium of instruction*.

modern fields of study.

Dr. Mahathir said Malaysia's national language, like those of other colonised countries, became dormant during colonial days because it was not given the opportunity to be the official language and the language of school education.

Misconception

Malay at that time remained a vernacular language and was only taught at the primary school level. It was also pushed aside and not given the opportunity to be used at the secondary and tertiary levels of education, resulting in a cleavage between the national language and the development of modern fields of study, including science and technology.

This had given rise to the misconception that it was not capable of becoming an academic or scientific language.

The elites

However, he was uneasy about the involvement of the country's elites and professional in the use of the national language, with Malaysia maintaining English as a second language for reference and international communication.

"If there is ever a problem in future, it will probably lie in this," he said.

Until now, a large number of the English-speaking community had the tendency to isolate themselves within their own language and refuse to express themselves in the language of the masses.

This had resulted in the people being denied the great store of knowledge and culture of the elites.

"I am still afraid that within our bilingual situation, our elites will still