

Enhance status of Bahasa: PM

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The development of Bahasa Malaysia into an international language must be preceded by efforts to enhance its status locally, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

More original works would have to be written and the vocabulary enriched before the language could be respected as a medium of intellectual pursuit, he said.

"We cannot merely translate works into Bahasa Malaysia; our intellectuals must come up with original pieces -- in Bahasa Malaysia -- to boost the people's confidence in the language," he told participants at the National Language Convention at the University of Malaya.

Speaking on the theme *Language and National Dignity*, the Prime Minister said "our own house has to be put in order" before Bahasa Malaysia could be proposed as an international language.

"If the people using the language are progressive and developed, then Bahasa Malaysia will naturally follow and be itself progressive."

He also prescribed other changes, which he said were necessary, to ensure the deve-

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lopment of Bahasa Malaysia.

One is a change in the attitude towards the use of Bahasa Malaysia, by both Malays and non-Malays.

He called for an end to the mental block over using the national language, saying: "Using Bahasa Malaysia and being fluent in it will not change the identity of the speaker. He will not become Malay, merely Malaysian. Racially, he remains what he is.

"As for the Malays themselves, they will have to be more confident of the ability of non-Malays and foreigners to speak Bahasa Malaysia."

He referred to the curious habit some Malays have of replying in English to non-Malay speakers of Bahasa Malaysia.

And then there are others who tend to take on the accent and mispronunciations of the non-native speaker or, worse, laugh at his attempt to speak the language -- an act which, the Prime Minister said, would only kill any interest in learning the language.

Dr Mahathir also spoke of the need for Malays to learn the languages of other Ma-

laysian races to enable them to understand the culture and psychology of those communities.

"This will help us avoid any act which could insult the other race and give us a wider experience of the learning process," he said.

He urged Malaysians not to close their minds to learning other languages of the world.

In an apparent reference to purists who would not tolerate the intrusion of foreign words into Bahasa Malaysia, he said there was no longer any language in the world that was free from the influence of other languages.

Similarly, Bahasa Malaysia has borrowed from other languages such as English, Portuguese, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian.

"What we today know as Bahasa Melayu is actually Bahasa Malaysia, a new and modern language capable of meeting the challenges of knowledge," he said.

The day-long convention was organised by the Umno cultural bureau. More than 1,000 participants from various language and literary organisations discussed four working papers.