

PM: English used as a tool

By LEE KAR YEAN

KUALA LUMPUR: Stifling the English language is not the way to promote Bahasa Melayu, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"We are not discarding our language. But we should not become fanatical about it because that will make it difficult for us to acquire knowledge to benefit our race in a competitive world," he said.

"As for me, for a language to be, we need to develop the race first."

Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, said this in a letter published in yesterday's issue of *Utusan Malaysia* in re-

sponse to criticism about his stand on the use of English.

The debate on the usage of English began with a suggestion in the daily that advertisements in English be banned.

Certain quarters then suggested that English news, speeches and other forms of the language should also be curtailed.

The Prime Minister said restricting the use of English was not the way to improve Bahasa Melayu.

He noted that the *Utusan* group was unhappy with his stand and he had twice been criticised in the editorial and in articles by columnist Awang Selamat.

Although the Malay daily

had questioned his sincerity over the use of Bahasa Melayu, Dr Mahathir said he loved his own language just like *Utusan Malaysia*.

"The use of English does not mean we have been colonised," he said.

"Whether we like it or not, English is an international language. For that reason Japan, during the *South-East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere* era had tried to spread the use of Nippon-go exclusively.

"Today they are forced to master the English language," he said.

Dr Mahathir also commented on the inconsistency of the daily which wanted the complete use of the national lan-

guage but on the other hand recognised the importance of English.

He said it was vital to develop the Malays first before their language could even be used internationally.

Dr Mahathir said past examination results had shown Malay students were very poor in English while the non-Malays, who needed to learn three languages, were more successful in mastering English.

"I am worried one day the Malays may have to depend on the non-Malays as interpreters when speaking to foreigners and in government and business transactions," he said.

The Prime Minister said the country would no doubt learn

Arabic if it was an international language today but English was the lingua franca of the world, thus the need to learn it.

He said it was not wrong to use and learn other languages to upgrade the standard of the Malays and the most appropriate and easiest to master was English.

The Prime Minister ended his letter with a famous Malay proverb *Biar mati anak jangan mati adat* (It is better to let a son perish than to let customs die) which he said reflected the fanatical stand on tradition.

"From the logical point of view, if a son had died then the custom cannot possibly live on," he said.