

Dr M: Accept all religions

Malaysians must be tolerant

By SHAILA KOSHY

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysians, as a multi-racial and multi-religious society, must be reasonable and be able to control their feelings when it comes to religion, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

This was a challenge facing all Malaysians, the Prime Minister stressed when answering questions at a dialogue after opening the Institute of Islamic Understanding (Ikim) here yesterday.

The opening ceremony was preceded by a conference on *Islam and Tolerance* on Wednesday attended by local and foreign participants of various religions.

Dr Mahathir said: "The Quran says: 'To you, your faith; to me my faith', but tolerance is regarded by some as un-Islamic.

"If any group is close to the Muslims, it is the Christians but we want to hate and they want to hate.

"We need to get away from emotions and read all the *hadith* and not just read them selectively to

justify the hatred," he said.

He said Malaysia, with its multi-ethnic background, had managed to maintain relative harmony.

"There were great tensions but, over the years, we have convinced all the communities that it does not pay to have bias.

"We are not exactly living in harmony but the animosity has decreased to an extent that we can live together and eat together," he said.

To another question, Dr Mahathir said it was up to all Malaysians to strive to live peacefully and not just leave it to the Government.

"The Government plays a role in that it does not allow anyone to stir up racial hatred.

"We have a weapon — we detain such people because we believe in the general good of the society as opposed to individual rights," he said.

The participants broke into laughter when Dr Mahathir said the Government was very forgiving.

"We have arrested peo-

ple and let them go and now some have ended up as ministers," he added.

Asked how the Government would practise tolerance in Sabah where the political and religious conflicts were intertwined, Dr Mahathir said it was difficult for Muslims to separate the two.

"Sabah, which has many Christians, has had Muslim chief ministers who tried to convert the people to Islam against our advice," he said.

"This is because of the belief that one gains merit with conversion. We are telling Sabah to leave it alone — a Muslim should not be unfair to non-Muslims."

Dr Mahathir said the position in Sabah should improve with the post of the chief minister rotating among Muslims, Christians and Buddhists.

"Then, if the Muslim chief minister converted (the people), the next chief minister might convert them back," he told the audience.

Asked about conversion to Islam upon marriage to a Muslim, Dr Mahathir said it was more a cultur-

al rather than religious practice.

"Apostasy is not tolerated in Islam and we need to look for a way that does not disturb the general tenor of the society," Dr Mahathir said.

He agreed that the tolerance policy held by the Cabinet did not always filter down.

"We try but we can't convince everybody, especially the Opposition party in the East Coast.

"I beg you to be patient," he said.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said Ikim was set up because many of the

problems faced by Muslims came from the differences in understanding among Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam.

He said most problems in any society was due to differences in opinion, citing the strained relations between Britain and Malaysia as an example of difference in understanding of the term "press freedom."

"For us, it is the freedom to report the truth while in the West it means the right to lie and report falsehoods," said Dr Mahathir.

He said many Muslims

were not well-versed in the Quran and the *hadith* and were susceptible to the interpretations of those who acted in self-interest.

Dr Mahathir said there were one billion Muslims in the world with millions living as minorities in non-Muslim countries.

The majority in the world did not view aggression against or murder of Muslims as serious and this was because people did not understand Islam.

Dr Mahathir said at times, it was the Muslims themselves who caused the misunderstanding.