

Need to understand Islam

By Farush Khan

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that it is important for Muslims and non-Muslims to understand the teachings of Islam correctly if the ties between them are to be improved.

He said that while Muslims should be aware of the religious requirements in connection with their relationship with non-Muslims, the latter must also at least understand the basic principles of Islam.

He said the lack of such understanding had led to misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, thereby resulting in tension and even conflict between them and those of the other faiths worldwide.

He said that virtually all problems in the community were caused by the difference of understanding in certain matters.

For example, he said, the present tension in Malaysia-Britain ties was due to the difference of understanding in respect of the freedom of the Press.

"While Malaysia interprets this freedom as the freedom to report the truth, in the West, freedom of the Press means the right to report untruths and to tell lies," Dr Mahathir said at the opening of the RM10 million Institute of Islamic Understanding (Ikim) building in Langgak Tunku, off Jalan Duta here.

He also launched 12 books and periodicals published by Ikim.

Ikim is a think-tank committed to effect the true understanding of Islam so as to bring about peace, togetherness, economic and spiritual vibrancy.

He said it should be understood that even the Quran had made it clear that there was no compulsion in

religion and that Muslims were required to have good ties with non-Muslims who did not develop animosity towards them.

"Establishing good relations certainly requires tolerance towards the cultures, customs and practices of the people of other religions," he said at the function which was preceded by the Conference on Islam and Tolerance.

Dr Mahathir pointed out that there was actually no reason for Muslims and non-Muslims to be enemies.

"If we were to learn from the *sunnah* (prophetic traditions), obviously it is the Muslims who should get the trust of the non-Muslims."

He said that if the non-Muslims were not influenced by the history of animosity between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as by the slanted views by certain parties, they would not have suspicions towards the Muslims.

Dr Mahathir said the establishment of Ikim was based on the identification that most of the problems in connection with human relations, especially those of different religions, were due to difference of understanding on the same matter.

He said that if a study could be done objectively on certain matters by all parties, then such differences of understanding could be reduced.

At the same time, interpretations by those interested parties could be curtailed and reviewed by the *ulamak* who have no self-interest to ensure that only the true teachings of Islam were accepted and disseminated among the Muslims, he said.

Dr Mahathir said the participation of non-Muslims in Ikim-organised seminars was an important aspect in

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efforts to improve the understanding of the basic principles of Islam among non-Muslims.

"Their participation will also help the *ulamak* and Muslim scholars to understand their views and understanding of Islam and the Muslims.

"With that, we can rectify any possible misunderstanding among non-Muslims towards Islam and Muslims, at least in Malaysia."

On the understanding of Islam by Muslims, Dr Mahathir said it was influenced by the interpretation of their teachers and *ulamak*.

He said the *ulamak* were also influenced by the values and acceptance of the community around them as well as other interests.

This, he said, would lead to the community getting religious guidelines which were half-true.

He said the difference of opinion and interpretations between one *ulamak* and

the other could become so wide that they might not want to accept each other's interpretation. This could lead to a split among people of the same religion.

He said that as Muslims normally could not afford to understand the teachings of Islam just by reading the Quran or *hadith*, anyone whom they considered able to interpret the teachings were accepted as teachers and interpreters.

"While most of them are sincere and harbour no self-interest, there are also many who take advantage of the ordinary Muslim's lack of knowledge to give all sorts of interpretation and seek influence.

"This not only results in the emergence of wrong teachings, but also threatens the faith of many Muslims."

He said it was such wrong teachings which could influence some extremist Muslim groups to act violently against other Muslims or the Governments of Muslim countries.

Dr Mahathir said the Qur-

an had also taught Muslims not to be influenced by uncontrolled emotion.

He said misdeeds by enemies should not be reciprocated by misdeeds by the Muslims.

If the Muslims wished to counter misdeeds and cruelty, he said, it should not be carried out to the extent that it degraded their credibility as a community that was respectable and just, though firm.

He said the principle of fairness and tolerance was recorded in history where the Christians and Jews under the Bani Umaiyah in Spain and Bani Abassiyah in Baghdad received equal opportunities to study together with Muslim students at institutions of higher learning and hostels sponsored by Muslim Governments.

The Prophet, he said, had taught Muslims not to make revenge an obstacle for them to practise good deeds.

He said that when the non-Muslims were facing a drought, the Prophet gave the poor among them finan-

cial aid. The Prophet also advised Muslims to do good to their parents though they were not Muslims and also visit those who were sick irrespective of their religions.

He said the examples by the Prophet were also emulated by his companions. For example, he said, the second Caliph, Umar Al-Khattab, had given a fixed stipend from the Baitulmal (treasury) to a Jewish family and a group of Christians.

He said Umar had also reminded his successor to be fair to non-Muslims, protect them and refrain from causing inconveniences to them.

"If all Muslims know and understand the teachings of Islam from the Quran, *hadith* and *sunnah*, from books and history, not only will their ties with non-Muslims improve, but also non-Muslims will really understand the teachings and principles of Islam.

"With this, it will prove the Islamic tolerance in relation to all parties."