

Dr M: Malays not keen to learn other languages

9 JUL 1984

From Zainon Ahmad

PARIS, Fri.— The Prime Minister has advised Malays to discard the mentality of a people recently freed from colonialism and learn to be more confident by acquiring proficiency in at least one foreign language.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said most people in sophisticated societies are proficient in at least two languages — their mother tongue and a foreign language.

He said among the peoples in Malaysia, it is the Malays who are reluctant to learn and master foreign languages, some because they have been told that they may lose their identity and culture.

"Thus, while Chinese school students are proficient in Chinese, Bahasa

Malaysia and English, the Malays communicate only in their mother tongue — even in that they are fast losing proficiency," he told Malaysian Pressmen when asked whether the country had embarked on a new policy to send students to France.

Dr Mahathir said the policy to send students out to other countries, including non-English speaking ones like France and the Arab lands, had been initiated long ago but always the choice is English-speaking countries.

He said France had offered numerous places for Malaysians in their educational institutions but the question is whether they, especially the Malays, are willing to study in French.

"Seems to me Malays prefer only to study in Malaysia

as they speak only Bahasa Malaysia and work only in Malaysia," he said, adding that it was difficult even to send them abroad as diplomats.

To a suggestion that it could not be that bad, he said: "It is. You ask these diplomats." He indicated Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Foreign Ministry deputy secretary-general Datuk Abdul Halim Ali and former secretary-general Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong.

He said their young diplomats have problems socialising in countries where they are posted. "They can speak English but not proficiently. As they are not good in the language, they become shy and prefer not to speak."

He said: "It is a real problem. Such being the case,

can we trust them to negotiate treaties which require the use of proper and precise words. Such is the situation that these young diplomats are now attending English improvement courses."

The problem is Malays still feel as if they are only recently freed from colonialism and therefore need to exert their identity, he said adding that is why they refuse to study a foreign language as they could lose their Malay identity and culture.

The Prime Minister said it was a false assumption. Once they have gained confidence and capability, they would be respected. Their country would also be respected and would cause even more foreigners to study Bahasa Malaysia.

To another question

whether he was asking France for more training facilities for Malaysians, Dr Mahathir said the French made several offers even before he could broach the subject.

He said the Civil Service Minister, Andre Rossinot, who met him at Le Bourget airport on his arrival, had offered several places in educational institutions here to study French, medicine and post-graduate courses in several fields.

"We welcome these offers. In our discussions with members of the private sector, we stressed that while we want investments we also want technology transfer.

"It is important that they help our people acquire several skills important for us to progress further," he said.