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Dr M: We are fair to non-Muslims (HL)

Syed Nadzri in Riyadh

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in a speech after receiving the King Faisal International Prize last night, touched on the need for good government which in the case of Malaysia includes being fair to non-Muslims.

"This is a principle acceptable in Islam," he said. "What the Malaysian Government is doing is in accord with the religion though many Muslims would like to think this as being secular."

It is also a practice which he described as "our faith and our creed in Malaysia".

Dr Mahathir, who arrived in Riyadh yesterday outlined his thoughts after receiving the prestigious award from Prince Sultan, the Saudi Arabian Second Deputy Premier, at the Al-Khozama Centre.

The award, in recognition of Dr Mahathir's service to Islam, was Saudi Arabia's version of the Nobel Peace Prize. The award carries with it a certificate containing a citation, a 22K 200gm gold medallion and 750,000 Riyals (RM500,000).

The award foundation in Riyadh quoted Dr Mahathir as a widely respected statesman whose policies fostered rapport and co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. He was also commended for playing an important role in setting up the International Islamic University, Pusat Islam, Bank Islam and Yapeim, the Islamic Economic Development Foundation of Malaysia.

As the recipient of this year's service to Islam category, Dr Mahathir joins previous winners: Saudi's King Khalid ibn Abdul Aziz and King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz, South Africa's Ahmad H. Deedat and Bosnia's Alija Izetbegovic in the history books as outstanding individuals in the Islamic world.

"Indeed," Dr Mahathir continued, "we believe that being just to the non-Muslims who are not against us simply reflects the true teachings of Islam.

"We have always to remember that as much as we do not like Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries to be oppressed, we must not oppress non-Muslim minorities in our midst."

To the Malaysian Government, Dr Mahathir said political stability, good government, knowledge of science and technology, material wealth and modern sophistication were all part of the process of strengthening the Muslim ummah.

"To us, rejection of the Muslim brotherhood, violent feuds, killing of other Muslims in the name of Islam and Allah when in fact the objective is political...to us, all these cannot be Islamic."

"Many Muslims would like to disagree, arguing that this was being secular but we will not argue with them because debating with or opposing them will not convince them that we are right. But we believe and we are equally convinced in our beliefs that what we do is in the service and in accord with Islam."

Dr Mahathir said it would not do any good to pass judgment on other Muslims or to destroy Muslim unity because this would only weaken them and cause them to be dependent on non-Muslims. In many cases, this has caused them to be enslaved by the "professed enemies of Islam".

On the award, Dr Mahathir said it was a great honour to Malaysia and its people - both Muslims and non-Muslims - without whose mutual

tolerance, sensitivity and respect, Malaysia would not be what it is today.

Dr Mahathir also traced the history of Islam in Malaysia, noting that the progress of Malays owed much to Islam.

Malays, he said, came into contact with Islam 900 years ago through Muslim traders from Hadramant - already skillful people and successful in life.

"Had the first Muslims who landed in Malaysia been ignorant paupers belonging to different sects of Islam, constantly fighting each other and slitting each other's throats, even if they pray and fast, the ancestors of today's Malays would have rejected Islam.

"In the context of today's world, it is very doubtful that today's Muslims would succeed in spreading the blessings of the Islamic religion to the Malays if they are not already Muslims."

Despite the many challenges facing Muslims in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said they have remained faithful and committed to Islam.

"Indeed, we believe that our material progress is in accord with and in full support of the teachings of Islam," he said, "in particular the injunction regarding the brotherhood of Muslims and the need for us to be strong so we may be able to defend ourselves and our faith against those who wish to separate us from our religion and destroy it."

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