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National service for youths likely

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The Government may consider introducing national service for youths who leave school as one of the means of character building, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, adding that its form has not yet been determined.

"This is something for the Government to consider," Dr Mahathir told reporters after attending a special meeting with representatives of Federal and State agencies involved in religious activities at Pusat Islam today.

He also said a nationwide campaign to combat the spread of social problems among Muslims had been launched with resources pooled from all relevant ministries as well as departments and agencies.

The Prime Minister said the campaign was to identify and find possible solutions to the increasing problems affecting Muslim youths.

Later, when elaborating on the proposed national service, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman said youths who leave school might be required to undergo specific programmes.

"It does not have to be military, but something like summer camps or character-building courses. The Government will decide whether to make it compulsory."

Asked to elaborate on religious studies in schools, Dr Mahathir said there could be weaknesses in the content of religious education in schools.

This, he said should be looked into as it might be among the contributory factors to the increasing social problems among Muslims youths.

Asked whether the social problems meant that the country's religious education was a failure, Dr Mahathir said:

"It is not a failure of the system but it may be a failure of the contents. What are we actually teaching? Is it sufficient if we only teach the students how to pray?

"We have to actually teach them how to lead a good lifestyle and maintain good social behaviour. It (the religious education) should be aimed at shaping good character."

Dr Mahathir said there was a need to review the religious education as there were many who could not pray or even recite the Syahadah.

However, Dr Mahathir said the task of developing good character should not be left to religious teachers alone but should involve every member of the society.

"In fact, all of us should be involved in solving the social problems. We should not say that we do not have the power to solve such problems and should therefore leave it to those with power.

"This is not true because all of us have power, including the media who have power to ensure that information disseminated is correct and suitable so that the youths could grow up to become better people," he said.

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