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Threat of Opposition exploiting prayer sermons 'under control'

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman said today the threat of Friday prayer sermons being used by the Opposition to spread its propaganda is under control.

He said mosques were under the tight scrutiny of the State Religious Departments and texts for Friday prayer sermons were screened before being delivered.

"Claims that the majority of mosques in this country are under the influence of Pas are not true.

"These claims were made by people who do not understand that not everybody who comments on religious issues, laced with political undertones, is a Pas member."

Abdul Hamid was speaking after officiating at the closing ceremony of the National Seminar on Information Technology in Islamic Education 1997 at Pusat Islam.

He also denied claims that the Federal Territory Religious Department had been lackadaisical in its control of mosques which resulted in more than 90 per cent of them being controlled by Pas.

Abdul Hamid was referring to the speech by Umno Batu divisional head Datuk Azman Attar at the recent Umno General Assembly who urged action against the religious department over the matter.

"The problem was actually caused by invited speakers who had not prepared a text before delivering their sermons and then used the opportunity to vent their anger over Government policies."

He added that directives had been issued to mosques in the Federal capital to ensure that only approved texts were delivered by invited speakers during Friday prayer sermons.

On the use of information technology in Islamic education, Abdul Hamid said the approach should be focused not only on how to use it as an educational tool but also in building a defence against its negative influences.

He said negative influences, found particularly on the Internet, could only be checked through better emphasis on self-censorship which could be encouraged by religious and moral education.

"Material found on the Internet is very hard to regulate and we need to build our own defences against this menace and not rely solely upon the Government to take action."

Abdul Hamid however, said the Government was taking all steps possible to counter negative influences.

"For example, we are aware that there are materials which contain deviationist teachings on the Internet.

"To counter this, Pusat Islam, the Malaysian Islamic Development Department and other related agencies have formed an action committee to set up home pages on the Internet which contain accurate information about Islam."

Abdul Hamid said the Government's approach to such problems emphasised educating the public rather than enforcing laws and regulations that could create a repressive atmosphere.

"Our approach was to look at the broader picture especially when tackling such issues.

"This I feel has been successful based on the improvement in the understanding of religious and moral sentiments in the country."

Abdul Hamid also made it clear that it was the same message conveyed by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad in his speech during the recent Umno General Assembly.

"When the Prime Minister mentioned the need for us to expand our focus on religious matters, we must not misunderstand this as a message which belittles issues such as the aurat.

"We should instead realise that there is a bigger agenda that needs to be tackled in the development of Islam and over emphasis of a particular issue such as aurat could be unhealthy in this respect."

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