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`Malaysia a model of religious tolerance'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Malaysia-European Union Joint Seminar: Europe and The Islamic World to be opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on March 24 will showcase Malaysia as a role model for other countries.

The Netherlands Ambassador to Malaysia, Theo Arnold, said as a role model, Malaysia could put forth the important message that religious tolerance was the key to success.

He said being a Muslim country, Malaysia could be proud that it had been highly successful due to the close co-operation among its ethnic groups.

"The uniqueness of this country is its multi-ethnic society. Very few countries have this to offer," he added.

The two-day seminar is organised by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia and the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and supported by the EU.

The New Straits Times is the official newspaper for the event.

In an interview, Arnold said he and several Ambassadors residing in Kuala Lumpur came up with the idea for the seminar in 1995 as they felt there were misconceptions in Malaysia about Europe and Islam.

"Europe was often represented as being hostile towards Islam as a religion and also towards Muslim immigrants in Europe.

"At the same time, we felt there were a lot of misconceptions in Europe on Islam and its role in development. The seminar will provide a bridge for both sides to become more understanding and work for a better world."

Widely travelled Arnold, who is in his fifth year as ambassador to Malaysia, said: "I have learned over the years that all religions preach the same basic values.

"All faiths preach tolerance towards other religions as a way to live in harmony and prosper in peace on this planet. Only through a liberal attitude can we hope for better understanding."

Muslims in the Netherlands make up about four per cent or 600,000 of its 15.6 million population. The Muslims are mostly migrant workers and refugees from Turkey, Morocco, Surinam and Bosnia.

The Dutch constitution provides for freedom of religion and there are over 300 mosques in the Netherlands.

He said the image of Muslims as poor and violent was difficult to remedy but religious extremism, even among Christian sects, was something Europeans could not understand.

"We should grow towards a situation of tolerance within our own religions and among religions," Arnold added.

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