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Mahathir-Interview

MUSLIM COUNTRIES MUST NOT ISOLATE THEMSELVES, SAYS DR M

KUALA LUMPUR, July 6 (Bernama) -- Muslim countries cannot isolate themselves and must integrate with the rest of the world or they will be sidelined, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"It is no longer possible to be isolationist in any way. We have to integrate, we have to bring ourselves up to the same level in terms of science, technology and industry," he said in an interview with Dr Nazir Khaja, chairman of the California-based Islamic Information Service.

The interview was aired by TV2 today in conjunction with the Maulidur Rasul celebration to mark the birth of Prophet Muhammad. An aide to the Prime Minister said it was conducted several months ago and screened in the United States in February this year.

During the hour-long interview, Dr Mahathir was asked if he would continue to lead after the 1999 Umno party election and about his relationship with his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"It is not yet time to decide. I'll have to see but I wouldn't like to leave the country's leadership when there is a problem faced by the country," he said, referring to the current economic crisis.

On reports by the Western media that there are serious differences between him and Anwar, Dr Mahathir said there were no two people who were exactly the same.

"I don't expect my deputy to be the same as myself. But our differences are minimal, we can get along fine," he said.

On the view that Islam was always going backwards, Dr Mahathir said it was necessary to go back but not to the life of more than a thousand years ago.

"But go back to the original teachings of the Prophet. See how it has influenced the ignorant Arabs to the extent of building great civilisation.

"So go back to what the teachings are all about and how to protect yourself. But we stress more on the form rather than the substance of the teaching," he said, adding that Muslims today cannot defend themselves with horses and swords as mentioned in the Quran.

Asked on the present confusion generally among Muslims, Dr Mahathir said it was because the responsibility of freedom was not really understood.

"We only have freedom if we are responsible. You cannot be absolutely free and irresponsible, that will result in society becoming destabilised," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said that democracy was compatible with Islam and it meant the welfare of the majority and while individuals have their rights, they could not override that of the community.

"The individual must admit to the needs of the majority. If the majority needs are ignored by individuals, we cannot have any stability within the society," he said.

On the Islamic way of governing, Dr Mahathir said the most important was to respect decisions made by the majority and a chosen government must be allowed to rule for the duration allowed by the constitution.

But what happened often was that no government was allowed to rule full length and instead, attempts were made to disturb the society such as street and daily demonstrations so that the government would find it impossible to rule, he said.

Asked on criticisms against a lot of Muslim countries for human rights

violation, Dr Mahathir said he disagreed with the tendency to link Muslims with human rights violation because there were such violations in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

On Malaysia's Vision 2020 to turn the country into a developed nation by that year, Dr Mahathir said a lot more work had to be done and Malaysia was very far from achieving its target.

" So we have to keep running very, very fast in order to achieve the target faster than the people who are actually ahead of us," he said.

He also said that the New Economic Policy (NEP) had largely succeeded in bringing the Malays to the level of non-Muslims and now was the time for the whole community, Muslims and non-Muslims, to move forward.

"I think we are on the right track. But of course, there are other forces within the community which may be a stumbling block to our progress," he said.

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