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National unity is key to racial, religious harmony

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ON May 26, the National Unity Advisory panel met under the chairmanship of National Unity and Social Development Minister Datin Seri Paduka Zaleha Ismail following its re-organisation and the appointment of additional members.

Appointed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the 59-member panel consisted of secretaries-general of relevant ministries, state secretaries, departmental heads, representatives of volunteer organisations, corporate leaders, religious heads and social activists.

Panel members were given a specific task to freely discuss all issues concerning unity and to make recommendations to the government on what needs to be done to tackle problems which impede unity.

The panel's role is important considering one of its tasks is to help the National Unity Department to formulate and implement programmes to promote unity and resolve potential causes of racial or religious conflict.

Malaysia has often been cited by many foreign visitors as an example of how a nation of diverse races and ethnic communities can live in peace and harmony.

Yet, Malaysians must not take this unity for granted but instead continuously work towards nurturing and reinforcing unity.

Even though we have been a tolerant and accommodating society, it is necessary for Malaysians of all races to always be sensitive to issues or disputes which can lead to unrest.

The Hindu temple-mosque dispute in Kampung Rawa, Penang, has proven how fragile religious and racial harmony can be if problems pertaining to places of worship are not handled properly.

Not only must the followers of the respective religious faiths be respectful and sensitive to one another, even civil servants and those in authority including the law enforcers must be sensitive to the needs and wants of the community so as to ensure actions taken will not give rise to racial conflict.

As pointed out by the Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Penang, Tun Dr Haji Hamdan Sheikh Tahir, the Kampung Rawa incident should serve as a reminder so that everyone should be careful, tolerant and sensitive to the feelings of other communities.

It is imperative that Malaysians of all races work for racial harmony and enhance efforts to promote understanding and unity which is vital for economic recovery and nation-building.

Unity which involves the fostering of shared values and a shared destiny with a feeling of a common identity is a fundamental prerequisite for the realisation of Vision 2020.

We must therefore ensure that there is unity between the communities, unity between labour and management, unity between business and government and above all unity between the political parties and within the national leadership.

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