

24 MAR 1998

Mahathir - Europe

NEVER TOO LATE FOR EUROPE-ISLAM RECONCILIATION, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, March 24 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said the possibility of any clash of civilisations in the future could be prevented if Europe and the Islamic world are willing to reconcile.

Such a move would never be too late and that most of today's conflicts could be resolved, he said opening a Malaysia-European Union joint seminar at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim) here.

Dr Mahathir said the reconciliation was possible and could be effected if Europeans and the Muslims were willing to change their views and perceptions of each other.

" By religious teachings and by culture, Muslims are eminently amenable to reconciliation.

" If the Europeans can change their views on Islam and the Muslims, it is possible for reconciliation to be effected and a completely new relationship established between Muslims and the Europeans, a relationship that will solve most of the conflicts that we see today and will certainly prevent any clash of civilisations in the future," he said.

The two-day seminar, on "Europe and the Islamic World", is jointly organised by Ikim and the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (OCIS), with the support of the EU.

" It is never too late to change. Even as the Europeans' perception of the Jews have changed, it is not impossible for Europeans' perception of the Muslims to change. And Muslims' perception of the Europeans should also change," said Dr Mahathir.

He said Europe's perception of the Islamic world had not changed very much since Islam became known to the Europeans and the establishment of the first contact between them and the Muslims.

He said Europe's refusal to recognise Islam as a religion ran parallel with the European attitude towards the Jews and Judaism during the early days.

"Europeans now accept Jews as their equals and as Europeans, with all the political and religious rights of Europeans.

"The Muslims on the other hand have not made any headway. If at all their relation with the Europeans has become worse than ever before," he said.

Dr Mahathir said although every now and then European writers and leaders tried to change the views and perceptions of Europeans on Islam and the Muslims, history had proven that all the attempts have failed.

He said Islam for the Europeans remained as the belief of the enemy, the anti-Christian and the non-Europeans.

"But if the Europeans can learn to accept the Jews and Judaism, is it not possible for the Europeans to tolerate Islam and the Muslims? Do we need a holocaust to trigger this change? Isn't the massacre of 200,000 Bosnian Muslims not enough?" he asked.

"But the Muslims have to look at themselves also, their contribution to the European distrust and dislike of Islam and the Muslims. They are not blameless," he said.

The prime minister said Europe and the Islamic world did not need a saint to bring about a better understanding about each other.

"All that we need is fair and accurate information about Islam and the Muslims on the one hand and about the true concern and generosity of the

Europeans on the other.

"This is actually more important than an understanding of each other's religion," he said.

Dr Mahathir, who spoke at length on the history of European relationship with the Islamic world, said Muslim countries and their people today had actually lost their independence through sanctions and financial pressures against them.

He said Europe could not fail to note that these sanctions and pressures had enriched the Europeans and made them more powerful.

"Many Muslim countries are now under siege by Europeans. Their people starved and deprived of medicine and the necessities of life.

Answering questions at a dialogue with seminar participants later, Dr Mahathir said the Western media was partly responsible for the wrong perception of Islam and Muslims among the Europeans.

He said most of the reports about Muslims were sensationalised and calculated to create a bad impression about the Muslims who were always portrayed as terrorists, extremists and fundamentalists.

On the EU's role to resolve world conflicts, Dr Mahathir said efforts by the union towards that end should be applauded.

However, he said, the EU would have to prove that it was independent of the United States in order to be seen as non-partisan.

Earlier, Michel Caillouet, ambassador and head of the EU delegation to the seminar, said the union has not closed its door for further inclusion of other countries to be its member.

Responding to a question from the floor on Turkey's application to join the 15-member EU, Caillouet said: "I don't think the door is finally closed". -- BERNAMA

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