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PM: Improving perception way to better Europe-Muslim world ties

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today conflicts of today and future clashes of civilisations between Europe and the Muslim world can be prevented if both improve their perceptions of one another and cast aside their distrust.

The Prime Minister said if the Europeans could change their view of Islam and the Muslims, reconciliation was possible and a new relationship between the two could be established.

"If the Europeans can banish their much more deep-rooted antagonism towards the Jews, the alleged betrayers of Jesus Christ, there is no reason why they cannot lessen their antagonism towards the Muslims, to change their view and their attitude towards the Muslim World," he said.

What was needed, he said, was fair and accurate information about Islam and the Muslims on one hand and the true concern and generosity of Europeans on the other.

Dr Mahathir was opening the Malaysia-European Union joint seminar themed "Europe and the Islamic World" at the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding.

The two-day conference is being organised by the European Union and Ikim, with the New Straits Times as the official newspaper.

Over 250 participants, including those from the EU, Malaysia and members of the diplomatic corps, attended the opening ceremony which was telecast live over RTM 1.

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

"Byzantium and Spain confronted the Islamic ummah (people) across battlefields in Eastern and Western Europe. The contact was painful for Europe for much territory was lost to Muslim forces.

"Despite the contact and despite the Muslims allowing the European Christians to remain in the conquered territory, European understanding of Islam was minimal."

He said the refusal to recognise Islam as a religion ran parallel with the European attitude towards the Jews and Judaism.

"This attitude went on for centuries. The Europeans for a long time actually believed that during the Jewish Passover, Christian children were slaughtered and their blood was mixed with the bread eaten by the Jews."

He said after the massacre of Jews in Spain and Nazi Germany, Europeans awoke to the injustices that inflicted upon the Jews.

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

He said Muslims, on the other hand, had not made any headway.

"If at all, their relations with the Europeans has become worse than ever before. After the Cold War, confrontation between Europe and the rest of the world seemed to be confined to Muslims and Muslim countries.

Dr Mahathir also spoke about how the Muslim scholars passed their knowledge to the Europeans and fuelled the rise of European civilisations, ending the Dark Ages of Europe.

"They (the Europeans) even forget that such scholars as Avicena, Averroes and others were Muslims," he said.

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