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Dr M: Govt wants to improve Orang Asli's lot

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday the Government will strive to improve the Orang Asli's living standards, but the efforts will not be at the expense of the community's customs.

"We do not aim to destroy the customs of the Orang Asli in the country. We want to improve the standards of living of the Orang Asli in line with the country's progress and development," he stressed.

Speaking at the presentation of certificates of competency in construction to 17 Orang Asli youths at Bukit Lanjan, Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, yesterday, the Prime Minister said even the Malays' way of living has changed over the years in line with the country's progress.

Only by uplifting the Orang Asli's overall status can the Government enable them to stand tall with the other advanced communities in the country, he added.

Dr Mahathir said it will be unfair if the Orang Asli continue to be left behind, while the other races and ethnic groups in the country are progressing.

He added that it is not the intention of the Government to see the Orang Asli do away with their customs, but the Government wants them to change to a modern lifestyle.

To make this possible, the Prime Minister said, the Orang Asli must make the most of skills training opportunities provided by the Government to them.

Dr Mahathir said gradual exposure to modern life has influenced some Orang Asli to be more enthusiastic about switching from shifting cultivation to modern living.

He also said suggestions that Orang Asli are unskilled or untalented people have no credence because they are indeed good craftsmen, especially in wood-carving and weaving.

Dr Mahathir called on Orang Asli youths to acquire skills in construction because of the strong demand for such manpower in the domestic sector.

He said it will be ideal if local manpower, including the Orang Asli community, can meet the labour demand in the sector, thus saving the country substantial outflow of foreign exchange.

At a press conference later, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia, unlike some other countries, gives special treatment to its indigenous people and spares no efforts to improve their living standards.

"In other countries, the indigenous people are placed in reserve land ... in some, children are taken away from their families."

Dr Mahathir said allegations by non-governmental organisations and foreign countries that Malaysia is neglecting its indigenous people are baseless

In improving the living standards of the Orang Asli, the Government has even resettled Orang Asli from their rural settlements to urban housing estates. A case in point is the resettlement of 158 Orang Asli in Bukit Lanjan to the Damansara Perdana housing estate.

To a question on nomination of Orang Asli representatives to stand in the coming general election, especially in areas with a sizeable Orang Asli population, Dr Mahathir said:

"We cannot give an Orang Asli a seat to contest just because he is an Orang Asli. Doing so may not get the support of others. And also we know

that he can't win because there is not a single constituency where the Orang Asli electorate makes up the majority."

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