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PM: Religious schools in Kelantan neglected

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The Government will look for ways to take over religious schools in Kelantan in the interests of students, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said sekolah agama rakyat (people's religious schools) needed to be upgraded as they lacked facilities and trained teachers.

"This is not good for the development of children who seek knowledge in religion," he said when asked to comment on the Kelantan Government's reluctance to allow the Education Ministry to take over these schools.

"But Pas doesn't care about all this. It wants to use religious schools to teach children to hate the Government, hate the Prime Minister," Dr Mahathir said after a private visit to the Butterfly Farm in Taman Tasik Perdana.

He said the Barisan Nasional Government was responsible to the people, and not to Pas.

The Education Ministry had proposed to take over all people's religious schools to improve their facilities and education system.

However, Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat said in Kota Baru last Thursday that his Government would not hand over such schools as the Ministry had no experience in running them.

Nik Aziz had said the Ministry could only take over such schools in Kelantan if it had more experience than the State Government.

The butterfly garden was opened in 1993 and taken over by KL Butterfly Garden in 1997. Chief executive C.T. Fong said the company planned to change its name to KL Butterfly Garden to be on par with the Royal Butterfly Garden in Britain and to make it the biggest in the world.

In Pekan, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the Government and Umno had no ulterior motive when they proposed to place religious schools under the Ministry.

Najib, who is Umno vice-president, said the move was solely to improve the academic achievements of students.

"We are sincere in wanting to ensure majority of the affected 70,000 students get the opportunity to fully develop their potential. If their potential is fully tapped, they can make immense contributions to the ummah and nation," he said.

"We do not see it from the political point of view ... or narrow interests like what has been expressed by Datuk Nik Aziz.

"At present, there are 55 religious secondary schools and all of them perform better than religious schools administered by State Governments."

He said Kolej Islam Kelang, Sekolah Menengah Agama Persekutuan in Labu, Negri Sembilan, and a few others were among the outstanding schools.

"For many years, all Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia candidates from these schools scored Grade One," he said, adding that competition for places in these schools was stiff as many parents wanted to enrol their children there.

Najib said parents were worried with the state of public religious schools, especially in Kelantan, where they are managed by Yayasan Islam Kelantan.

He said in many such schools, the potential of students was stunted due to poorly trained teachers. Some do not even have the SPM certificate.

Najib said he had received messages from Yayasan Islam Kelantan teachers that they were keen to serve under the Education Ministry due to the

better salary schemes and opportunities for promotion.

The Ministry, he said, would absorb teachers of the public religious schools.

In Kota Baru, Kelantan Umno chairman Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah last night pledged to introduce university-style professional management for public Islamic schools if it came to power during the general election.

This was because religious schools in Kelantan had been neglected by Pas.

"Umno will run the Islamic schools and pondok like universities to safeguard the interests of the students, when it comes to power in Kelantan," he said at a meeting with Umno election agents in Kubang Kerian.

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