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`Avoid the race trap' (HL)

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PENANG, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today reminded Barisan Nasional component parties not to allow themselves to be influenced by extreme racial sentiments which can eventually destroy the nation.

He said although each of the component parties had to defend the rights and interests of the different races that they represented, they had to take into consideration the sensitivity of others.

"If this is done, we will not make unreasonable demands," he said when opening the Gerakan National Delegates Conference 2000.

Also present were Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, Gerakan vice-president and Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, BN secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat, MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob.

Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman, said there was not a single race in Malaysia which obtained everything it demanded.

"No one will get all that he thinks is his right or lose all that he has a right to.

"But unfortunately it is entirely possible for all of us to lose everything. And that will happen when we become unreasonable in our demands, when we confront each other and resort to violence. When we do that the whole country will go up in flames and there will be nothing left for us."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians should not allow themselves and the nation to be destroyed because of their own absurdity.

He said although there were demands among the BN component parties, the willingness to accept reality and compromise enabled the party to remain united and maintain its power.

"In the BN, we do not have to waste time debating the differences of the people who are of different races, cultures, religions and speak various different languages," he said.

He added that the BN worked on common grounds to ensure that every member of the community progressed.

Dr Mahathir conceded there was dissatisfaction among the races, but emphasised that discussions on such matters should be done behind closed doors. "If we hold an open discussion, inevitably there would be some uncontrollable sentiments. There is a big possibility that it could trigger racial riots. Everyone will suffer."

But, the BN's spirit of consensus allows for power sharing and the allocation of responsibility. This ensures that no party is ignored.

He outlined how some countries, especially those "controlled" by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, languished in despair and poverty when they celebrated their independence day.

On the other hand, Malaysia celebrated its 43rd National Day amid progress, prosperity and peace.

Hoping that the people had learnt from recent incidents, he said the Government did not want the people and country to be destroyed because of mistakes, foolhardiness and ignorance.

Dr Mahathir also defined what Malaysia and Merdeka should mean.

"Clearly, we are blessed," he said. "Our dignity and sovereignty are protected and defended. This is the real meaning of independence in

Malaysia." On the Gerakan and its status in the BN, Dr Mahathir said despite its smaller representation in the State Assembly, Gerakan was entrusted with the power to govern Penang.