

Plan to upgrade education in rural areas

By KAMARUL YUNUS

THE Government will continue to give emphasis on upgrading education in rural areas in the next five-year Eighth Malaysia Plan, particularly in predominantly Malay areas, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

"We will bridge the digital divide so that everyone will have access to information and communications technology.

"And we will continue with our policy of creating more Muslim professionals and entrepreneurs," he said at the opening of a two-day international seminar on The Impact of Globalisation on Social and Cultural Life, An Islamic Response, in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Speaking to reporters later, Abdullah said Muslims accounted for less than 25 per cent of the total professionals in the country.

Given such scenario, he said there is a need to continue to stress on providing proper education to the Muslims so that they will be able to face the challenges of globalisation and a knowledge-based economy.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is

scheduled to present the Eighth Plan (2001-2005) at the Dewan Rakyat on April 23.

Information technology and women's development are said to be the areas expected to be given due emphasis in the Plan.

Earlier in his speech, Abdullah said the ummah risks becoming further alien-

ated, sidelined and pushed into irrelevance if they are unable to form a consensus among themselves on how to respond to globalisation.

In such a situation, he said the Muslims would not be associated with the digital revolution or advancement in biotechnology in the same way Muslims had been asso-

ciated with astronomy, philosophy, medicine and mathematics during the golden age of Islam.

"Without a response, Muslims will not play a vital role in globalisation. We are set to be passive recipients of knowledge," he said.

"While we look around the world and appreciate the

cultural and racial diversity of Muslims, we also notice the fact that there is no fully developed Muslim country that has any significant influence in the process of globalisation," he said.

Abdullah said his greatest fear was that Muslims would increasingly want to take the easy way out and be unable to do anything about the invasion of Western culture and the economic supremacy of the West.

"As such, groups within the ummah will agitate for a return to the glorious days of Islam by placing form over substance and encouraging the influence of the most orthodox schools of Islamic thought.

"Such a backlash will serve Islam no good," he said.

Abdullah agreed with those who said that globalisation was increasingly characterised by extremes, that is extreme economic efficiency, political dominance and cultural conformity.

"But let us ensure that the Islamic response is devoid of extremism and characteristics of a religion that stresses *wasat* or moderation. In our response to globalisation, let us not conform to its excesses and extremities," he said.