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Disabled teenager to join delegation

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - A disabled teenager will be given the opportunity to take part in the United Nations Special Session on Children in New York starting Sept 19.

He or she will join nine other specially selected teenagers in the National Unity and Social Development Ministry's delegation, led by Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman.

Siti Zaharah said in a telephone interview today her ministry was in the process of selecting the 10 teenagers. The list is expected to be finalised by Friday.

The ministry hopes to include a mute teenager in the delegation.

The selection criteria are stringent and according to guidelines set by the UN.

These include students who are already actively involved in national-level initiatives leading to the special session, and students with an interest, direct experience or expertise in issues that pertain to the outcome of the session.

The guidelines also require the students to have a solid understanding and experience of the issues relating to them in their own country, and to be able to speak on behalf of a cross-section of their peers.

The students selected would have to be articulate and knowledgeable, and represent a balance in gender, age, religion, rural and urban place of residence, as well as socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

However, only two out of the 10 will be able to participate actively in the special session.

The other eight will attend a special programme organised by the UN, which includes interesting activities such as camps, outings and visits.

The ministry had originally planned to send only two students, but strong support for children's issues by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had prompted the ministry to increase the number.

Besides officials from the National Unity and Social Development, the delegation is expected to include those from the Education and Health ministries, the Economic Planning Unit in the Prime Minister's Department and non-governmental organisations.

A record number of more than 100 children is expected to serve as delegates, providing them with the opportunity to meet and rub shoulders with world leaders, alongside some 1,000 representatives from child-based NGOs.