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Keeping tabs on religious schools

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The Government may review laws related to educational institutions to ensure Muslim students are not misled into believing it is their religious obligation to enrol in private religious institutions.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the move was also intended to check the abuse of Islam by the operators of such religious schools.

Malay students were attracted to such schools as they thought they were doing something good.

"Some of those who set up such schools use religion to generate income for themselves.

"The pupils are made to pay fees although the fees we charge in better equipped Government schools are either nominal or even free."

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after launching the inaugural Malay Education Congress at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

He was asked to elaborate on his opening speech remarks that 30 per cent of Malay primary school students discontinued secondary school and opted for private religious schools instead.

This statistic was provided by the Education Ministry. It also found that most of them were males.

Dr Mahathir said although facilities at such private schools were often inadequate and teachers were poorly trained, students were still made to pay fees.

"Despite this, why do they still want to go to private religious schools? Perhaps they want to learn religion. Perhaps they feel religious teaching in national schools is too shallow," he said.

However, instead of the right teachings of Islam, students often learned to hate the Government.

"Almost all of them end up with the Opposition. Their knowledge of Islam is actually shallow, unlike true scholars of the past who really mastered religious knowledge."

Dr Mahathir also expressed concern that Islamic teaching was interpreted wrongly and excerpts were used by irresponsible people for their political agendas.

The people who influenced these Malay students did so for their own interests.

They were not concerned if the Malays remained backward as long as their interests were met.

Dr Mahathir also spoke out against the labelling of all other knowledge besides religion as secular or un-Islamic.

He said the term secular, coined by non-Muslims, was a field which was separate from religion.

"But some Muslims who fear losing their influence have decided to interpret knowledge which has nothing to do with religion as secular and as such, forbid Muslims from acquiring such knowledge.

"They say if you want to be rewarded, all you need to do is to acquire religious knowledge," he said.

Muslims, who were increasingly influenced by such thinking, were afraid to admit that Islam actually tells them to acquire other knowledge for fear that they would be labelled unIslamic.

Parents and educationists, he said must inspire Malay students and not dampen their spirits by saying that the acquisition of other knowledge was

secular and so did not bring merit.

He said the work of professionals, such as doctors, architects or engineers, brought merit and in fact helped Muslims to live according to their religion.