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Malaysia to put more emphasis on science

Ramlan Said

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Government is placing greater emphasis on science and producing more scientists as they are the key to the country's future progress and independence.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the ability to invent and improve on products would help Malaysia to be less dependent on developed nations for various needs.

Even on vital matters like national security and defence, many countries today were still relying on weapons and systems invented by developed nations which possessed the edge because of their superiority in science.

Dr Mahathir said the misplaced perception that science and Islam were not compatible had to be corrected as the action of Muslims in abandoning the quest for knowledge, seen during the industrial revolution, had led to the community to be left far behind.

Speaking at a science convention at the Palace of Golden Horses, the Prime Minister said while Muslims were busy debating the process of modernisation and Islam, others used their time on research and development activities for the betterment of their people.

Taking a leaf from the history of the last Muslim empire, he said its downfall started with the emergence of views advocating lesser attention be given to certain fields of knowledge because they were purportedly not Islamic.

This resulted in a decline in the number of Muslim scientists, a stark contrast compared to the situation during the height of the Muslim civilisation where eminent Muslim scholars and scientists were well-known for their discoveries and inventions.

"But if we can invent new things through science that can help us become richer, more powerful and have the ability to protect ourselves, I believe such an approach is encouraged by the religion," Dr Mahathir said.

Since the end of the Ottoman empire, he said, no Islamic country had achieved progress and development which enable them to be the defender or protector of oppressed Muslims.

He said Muslim countries were now dependent on developed nations and even their enemies for security and defence matters.

"If we are not able to defend ourselves and the religion, aren't we to be blamed?"

"But if we want to produce modern weapons so that we don't have to rely on others, we need the knowledge and know-how.

"There are many fardhu kifayah (deeds compulsory for the society) neglected by Muslims like in defending ourselves and protecting the religion.

"If we failed in defending ourselves, actually we are at fault. We are to be blamed for the many Muslims in the world who are now suffering."

Dr Mahathir said Muslims were angry seeing their brethren like the Palestinians being treated unfairly but the solution to problems faced by Muslims rested in their ability to acquire knowledge, especially in science.

The Prime Minister said the benefits of having a stronger Muslim country could be seen when Malaysia despatched its troops to Bosnia.

"We are able to do this because we have developed our country, possessed sufficient funds and a trained army.

"It may be a little gesture but we can already see the benefit of one

being in a better position.

"Just imagine what can be done if Muslim countries possessed greater capability in various aspects, made possible through achievements in science," Dr Mahathir said.

During the industrial revolution, he said many developing countries missed the chance to be part of it as they were still colonised.

They had to contend to just playing the role of consumers of goods manufactured by developed nations using raw materials provided by them.

"There was even this perception then that the Malays were not capable of participating in this sophisticated industrial race.

"We are now in the information age. Since we are no longer colonised, we have the chance of participating in it and gain the benefits. If we are to miss this chance once again, the country will be left behind compared to others.

"The most fundamental issue is whether we consider the quest for knowledge in IT as something that is important.

"There are views that it is not so important, so there is no need to give it that much attention."

Later at a dialogue, Dr Mahathir said the small number of scientists in Malaysia was not because the people lacked the ability.

"The reason is because we don't consider science as important, we think it is something alien. So, it is important for us to provide the emphasis, especially among the Malays, on the link between science and religion.

"We should inculcate the importance for Muslims to master science and to debunk the perception that it has no relation to the religion. If this can be changed, the interest in pursuing science will pick up."

To another question on ways to enhance interest in the field, he agreed that a new culture should be inculcated among students that could help produce more scientists - the inquiring and curious mind.

Many questions posed were on facilities, incentives and career development for those involved in science at all levels.

Dr Mahathir said the Government would provide the facilities and incentives whenever possible, adding that the education system on science should also be reviewed towards nurturing more inquisitive students rather than those learning through memorising facts.

At a Press conference, Dr Mahathir said the national space policy was being formulated.

On the building of more national laboratories, he said the Government would study proposals from the scientists.

On the review of the education system, he believed Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, who was also present, would take note of the concerns raised.