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Mahathir-Tolerance

TARGET YOUNG GENERATION TO PRESERVE RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE, SAYS PM

KUALA LUMPUR, May 4 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the country's young generation should be the target of consistent efforts to protect and preserve religious tolerance.

Dr Mahathir said this is because children are usually free of biases and prejudices.

"Pupils at the kindergarten level have no qualms about studying and playing together. They often walk hand-in-hand without the slightest feeling of distrust and insecurity. They provide the best example of tolerance and peaceful co-existence," he said today.

Opening the General Assembly of the World Evangelical Fellowship here, Dr Mahathir said the splendid and cordial relationship would cool off when the children grew up with parental input and other environmental influences started to shape their minds.

"And this will result in prejudices they had not known before," he said, adding that the relevant religious authorities should look for ways to halt the loosening bondage of friendship among these young children.

"They can be made known of each other's similarities and differences, as far as religion is concerned. And it must be impressed on them that if they could respect one another, then living together as a community, even while professing different faiths, would not be an impossible task at all," said Dr Mahathir.

The prime minister said religious leaders in multi-racial and multi-cultural Malaysia should also revisit their roles as the country moved into a new era in the development of society.

He said religious leaders could make the greatest contribution in the form of promoting tolerance among their followers.

"For example, major religions uphold good neighbourliness and the honouring of family ties. These noble values should be given strong emphasis in all activities organised by religious bodies," he said.

Dr Mahathir said intolerance bred injustice which would invariably lead to rebellion and retaliation, making reconciliation almost impossible.

"It would appear that during times of stress, despair and frustration, people become increasingly irrational and they do things which they never think they are capable of. And so we see hideous brutality perpetrated by the most gentle people," he said.

The prime minister also proposed that religious leaders consider setting up inter-religious working groups at various levels of the community which could work to improve mutual understanding.

"Islam makes it clear that we must accept that others will believe in their own beliefs, worship in their own. To them their religions, to the Muslims theirs. Just as Muslims must accept the others' rights to their own faith, others too must accept and respect the right of Muslims as Muslims," said Dr Mahathir.

He also sounded a word of caution by saying that the people should be careful not to propagate religions at the cost of conflicts and violence as this could only bring about an environment where religions cannot thrive.

"We must be careful when undertaking matters involving religion. The sensitivity of others of different religious prescriptions must be given due considerations," he said.

A total of 611 people from 82 countries are attending the assembly which will end on May 10.

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