

Dr M: Setting up inter-faith association will take time

STAR

27 FEB 2002

By TAN KAH PENG

LONDON: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called for patience in the setting up of an inter-faith association in Malaysia because Muslim religious leaders feel "uncomfortable" about it.

"We are trying to reduce this discomfort among them," he said in reply to a question at an afternoon tea hosted by Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green and attended by about 80 guests at the House of Lords on Monday.

He said some conservative Muslims were fearful of being "infected" by other thoughts, though he had no problems meeting leaders of other religious faiths.

Despite their cultural and religious differences, Dr

Mahathir said Malaysians had a wonderful tradition of the open house in which they visited each other.

In reply to a related issue, he explained why the Malaysian Government was cautious in its approach to translations of Christian texts into Bahasa Malaysia as the use of the same terms as in Islam would cause confusion among Muslims.

Earlier in his address, Dr Mahathir said Islam was greatly misunderstood in the West, which equated religious extremism with fundamentalism when, in fact, the fundamentals of Islam preached peace and tolerance.

"If we follow the fundamental tenets of Islam, we are moderates, accepting and respecting religious differences and trying to accommo-

date people of other faiths. Islam abhors turmoil," he said.

He accused PAS of misinterpreting Islam and criticised the party for its narrow stand on the role of Muslim women in society, in sharp contrast to the encouragement of Umno to women to participate fully in the country's development.

In her welcoming address, Baroness Uddin praised multi-racial Malaysia for its harmony, saying that the country had much to offer the world in ethnic and community relations besides providing many opportunities for women to advance.

She described Dr Mahathir as a "truly global citizen" for his strong views on such issues as debt relief, poverty eradication and for standing up for the interests of the Third World countries.