

Muslims here not ready for dialogue

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Dr M: There is still much discomfort

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TIME and patience are needed before Malaysian Muslims are ready for an inter-faith organisation and dialogues with leaders of other religions, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He said some Muslims were conservative and uncomfortable with such an idea, and it would take time to reduce this discomfort and fear of other religious beliefs.

"We need to be patient and hope one day, we can have this inter-faith association for dialogue between Muslims and others religions," he said when asked at a meeting with about 80 community leaders here on Monday.

Representatives of the Houses of Lords and Commons, community and religious leaders attended the tea function organised by Baroness

Uddin of Bethnal Green.

Dr Mahathir added that he regularly met the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism.

To another question, he said the Government had to be careful about proselytising activities, and took a cautious approach to the translation of Christian texts into Bahasa Malaysia.

He said this was because the texts would use terms like 'Allah' and this could cause confusion among Muslims, especially those who were not well educated.

He added that Bahasa Malaysia bibles were used in Sabah because the people there were comfortable with it.

In his address, he said Malaysia was striving to ensure that extremist Islamic views do not get the upper hand, and noted it was wrong for people in the West to equate fundamentalism with extremism.

He said the fundamental tenets

of Islam required a person to be liberal, to accept and respect other religions, and to abhor violence and turmoil, and added that most Muslims adhered to the fundamentals.

Dr Mahathir also told them Malaysia gave full scope to women to participate in society as there was nothing in Islamic teachings which restricted the role of women.

In Malaysia, 70 per cent of the Muslims in universities are women, he said, and women are represented in all aspects of society, government and the corporate world.

He said restricting women would weaken society as they formed half the population.

In her welcoming address, Baroness Uddin commended Malaysia for offering a lot to the world in terms of ethnic and community relations, and providing opportunities for women to advance. She said Dr Mahathir was a truly global citizen for his stand on Third World issues.