

PM: Knowledge is vital tool

STAR 20 JUL 2002

'Muslims must open minds to non-religious matters'

By ZULKIFLI ABD RAHMAN

KUALA LUMPUR: Knowledge can be a tool to empower the Muslim community but it should not be confined to acquiring religious knowledge alone, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"We must stop thinking that the acquisition of knowledge other than that on religion gives no merit in the afterlife.

"There is no need to feel

guilty when we study these other subjects," he said in his keynote address entitled "The State of the Muslim World Today: Knowledge as a Tool of Muslim Political Empowerment" at the International Forum on Islam (Kalif 2002) at a hotel here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said the lack of progress among Muslims today was because of the rigid and wrong interpretations Muslims practised.

"The ulamas in the yesteryears had condemned these Western things such as elec-

tricity and mechanised vehicles and governments must obey these injunctions or risk being labelled un-Islamic.

"And so, we lost valuable time as the Industrial Revolution passed us by."

Even in Malaysia not so long ago, he said, TV sets were dumped into rivers because some religious teachers had declared them *haram* (forbidden).

Dr Mahathir said Muslims had ignored the important call by Islam to seek knowledge, adding that there were great

Muslim scholars who were exemplary in many areas such as science, physics and astronomy.

Great empires and civilisations were created, partly as a result of their work, he said.

"When the Islamic civilisation was at its peak, it took the Europeans several hundred years to catch up.

"But the Islamic world later crumbled when such knowledge was regarded as sinful or lacking in merit for the afterlife."

Answering questions from the floor on Palestine, Dr Mahathir said the Middle East crisis was caused not by religion but territorial disputes.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in his welcoming speech, said Muslims were no longer at the forefront of innovations.

The three-day forum, attended by Muslim and non-Muslim progressive thinkers, should be a platform to freely discuss where the Muslim world is heading, he said.