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S'pore-Mahathir

DR MAHATHIR'S TOP PRIORITIES BEFORE HIS RETIREMENT

SINGAPORE, Oct 23 (Bernama)--Reforming Malaysia's education system and taking steps to ensure that the country's fragile multiracial peace is preserved are the top priorities for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad before he steps down next October, the Straits Times reported.

"The clock may be ticking with just about a year to go, but he remains a man with miles to go before he hands over the reins," said the newspaper in its Kuala Lumpur-dated report.

Speaking to visiting foreign journalists at his Putrajaya office yesterday, he said that his priorities were to maintain the stability of the country and especially ensuring that the multiracial harmony which he had worked hard to build up remained after he had left the scene.

He noted that there were "gasps" when he was named Deputy Prime Minister years ago as some had feared that "this Malay ultra would wreak havoc in the country."

"I have been PM for 21 years and the Chinese who feared me now give me good support. This is something I would like to see perpetuated," he said.

"Today, when I drive around town or go to the shopping complex, the people, the Chinese, come up to me and say 'thank you'," Dr Mahathir was quoting as saying.

Malaysia's years of multiracial peace was the achievement he was most proud of, he said.

The government's affirmative action policies had worked and narrowed the gap between the Malays and Chinese, he added.

That was why there were no racial riots and problems among the races, unlike the situation in Indonesia during the financial crisis in the late 1990s, he said.

But he noted there were still a lot of disparities and "we have not completed the job."

While affirmative action had helped Malays make progress, he was still not happy with the number of successful Malays, noting that some Malays still had to learn that "life is hard, and you need to struggle."

The Straits Times said Dr Mahathir's other pressing concern was education reform, namely pushing through his proposal to introduce English as a medium of instruction for mathematics and science in primary schools from January.

Although the proposal had drawn fire from some groups within the ruling coalition, he was undeterred.

Like the rest of the world, Malaysia would have "to go with the times" and promote the use of English, he asserted.

During the hour-long interview, he also made plain that he planned to take the political battle to his opponents in the Pan Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), said the Straits Times.

Malaysia, Dr Mahathir declared, was a fundamentalist Islamic State and was recognised the world over as such.

This he said, was not a change in the country's position but a "statement of fact" as the country stuck to the fundamental beliefs of Islam, a tolerant religion which promoted peace, understanding and the acquisition of knowledge.

"So there is no need to fight to establish an Islamic State, which the opposition says it is fighting for. The world recognises Malaysia as an Islamic State, a model Islamic State, which they would like to copy."

He also declared that "radical Islam is not Islam".

"Many people are getting fed-up with the way Islam is being misinterpreted," Dr Mahathir said.

PAS, he said, had been able to play on the fact that many simple folks in the Malay kampungs, while religious, "are not very knowledgeable about Islam."

This was why they even believed opposition leaders who made statements comparing Allah to a gangster, he said.

Dr Mahathir said his party, Umno, would not shy away from the battle for Muslim hearts and minds.

"We have no intention of separating religion from politics. What we want to do is separate politics from this deviationist interpretation of Islam. We will call on religion to get the support of the people."

Dr Mahathir insisted that he "wants to take a rest" and would not remain as PM, nor as an MP. But he had not decided what he would do.

"I have been harassed by so many people on this question of my retirement. A lot of people have a lot of plans for me. But I keep an open mind," he said with a smile.

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