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`We must lead in Muslim nations' dialogue with West'

TANJUNG MALIM, Tues. - Malaysia must lead Muslim nations in dialogue with the West, as the future centre of Islamic civilisation will be in South or Southeast Asia.

New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, speaking to students and staff of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris here, said the Muslim world was now looking towards Malaysia, which had grown increasingly prominent on the global stage with its moderate brand of Islam.

"The future of Islam is in South-east Asia and maybe South Asia. I say this because the world has become a global village."

In his talk, entitled "Malaysia: Relations with Islamic Countries and Dialogue with the West", Abdullah said Malaysia should play a prominent role because of the nation's success as a model Islamic country.

Malaysia's position in the region, next to the world's largest Muslim nation, Indonesia, was also strategic. "The number of Arabs is about the same as the number of Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia, and even then not all Arabs are Muslims."

Fifty-five per cent of Malaysia's 24 million people are Muslims, and 87 per cent of Indonesia's 240 million.

He said Malaysia under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was working to give the West a true picture of Islam's values, excellence, progress and tolerance.

"The West's perception is that Islam is synonymous with the Taliban and terrorism, and it is economically backward and sometimes anti-modernisation. But this is not true.

"Malaysia's most important task now is to present the true form of Islam as stated in the Quran and Hadith."

Abdullah said Western fears of Islam were due to distortion. If they feared Muslims, he observed, it was "not because we are strong".

"In their perception, Islam is a religion determined to dominate the world. Like it or not, we must continue our dialogue with the West. They want to see an Islam that is moderate as practised by us, Indonesia, Lebanon and Egypt."

He said to lead the dialogue with the West, Malaysia should use the "Muslim diaspora" - Muslims living around the world, especially those in the United States and Europe.

"They can be a bridge to help establish good ties between the West and us."

Malaysia's traditional ties with Islamic countries began under the first Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman, expanded under Tun Razak and given more emphasis under Dr Mahathir.

"We have had a long history of relations with Islamic countries. Such links were very important when Indonesia under Sukarno wanted to menganyang (crush) us with their Konfrontasi of 1963-66.

"Our ties with Islamic countries helped us stand up against Indonesia when it tried to gather Muslim nations to its side."

Abdullah also noted how Kuala Lumpur had replaced Jakarta as a diplomatic hub since the 1980s.