

18/08/2002

Focus on deteriorating race relations among our undergraduates

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WORSENING race relations among undergraduates at public universities, from whom future leaders are usually identified, was highlighted by the vernacular newspapers last week.

Triggered by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that deteriorating ties between undergraduates of different races was worrisome, the issue was widely debated in the Bahasa Malaysia dailies.

Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia went to great lengths to examine the issue of race relations which has been increasingly touched upon by the Prime Minister in recent years.

In an editorial on Thursday, Berita Harian said no one should treat Dr Mahathir's concern lightly.

According to it, relations between undergraduates of various races at all universities had been worsening for years but little had allegedly been done by university authorities to correct the situation.

Blaming university authorities for not being proactive, Berita Harian suggested that they sponsor programmes that would see greater interaction between undergraduates from the different races.

The Prime Minister, in underlining the need to address the lack of interaction between undergraduates from the various races, had proposed that incentives be given to multi-racial clubs in universities which organise activities for all.

Berita Harian suggested that university authorities sit with student representatives to discuss the vexatious issue and ways to resolve the problem.

Common activities would allow undergraduates an opportunity to understand the sensitivities and cultural practices of the various races, the newspaper opined.

Calling on Malaysians to emulate the racial harmony of yore when races had a common identity, it said undergraduates should take the Prime Minister's statement as a challenge.

Utusan Malaysia, in a feature article yesterday, said undergraduates should put their heart and soul into efforts to establish multi-racial clubs.

Its reporter, Zalina Yahaya, said new life was being breathed into the old issue of race relations with the emphasis this time on university students.

Describing the situation as volatile, the report said this current generation of undergraduates would extend their prejudices to society at large if nothing was done to arrest the deterioration in race relations.

And something should be done soonest if a dangerous situation was to be avoided, the newspaper said.

The newspaper, however, asked if the setting up of such clubs was sufficient to help in racial integration in campuses.

It felt that the various faculties in universities were clearly reflective of the races with the Arts dominated by the Malays, Science by the Chinese and Law by Indians.

"In lecture halls and tutorial rooms, we can clearly see groups gathering according to race," the article said.

In hostels, the reporter said, efforts to put undergraduates of different races together had been fiercely opposed.

The Utusan Malaysia article also pointed out that all public

universities, with the exception of Universiti Malaya (UM) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), were dominated by one race.

Education being at the fore in newspapers of late, it was not surprising to see Berita Harian yesterday running an editorial on the Education Ministry's decision to pay a RM100 allowance per hour to retired teachers willing to teach Science and Mathematics in English.

Commenting on the positive reaction to the move, the newspaper said it would not be surprising if retired teachers were already calculating the money to be made.

The new scheme may be particularly useful to those who did not want to be employed on a full-time contract basis, the newspaper opined.

But they should not be blinded by the handsome monetary gains, Berita Harian said, adding that their experience should be put to good use in helping the Government improve the general standard of English.

Apart from education, both Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian devoted some space over the week to Singapore's latest drink, NEWater.

In a front-page report on Monday, Utusan Malaysia said some Malays in the republic were feeling rather awkward drinking the processed kitchen and toilet run-off.

Habibah Omar, in a piece that reflected the views of a section of Malays, said the sense of distaste was palpable among some.

Singapore Malay Human Rights Assembly (Perhakam) president Ibrahim Ariff was quoted as saying that Malays would prefer to drink water from Johor if given the chance to do so.

According to him, this was despite the fact that the Singapore Government had given the assurance that NEWater was clean and safe for consumption.

He also feared that the price of mineral water would spiral if people did not take to NEWater.