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Foreigners awed by Dr Mahathir's remarks

BLUNT, succinct, eloquent and cutting were some of the words used to describe Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's opening remarks at the conference yesterday.

Foreign participants appeared surprised at the forthright and transparent manner in which Dr Mahathir listed the reasons for the intellectual and social poverty in the Muslim world.

"The speech was extremely apt and extremely welcome," said Boston University Anthropology professor Robert Hefner.

"It is important to recognise that Muslims seeking to make it in modern society can do so in ways that vary, in ways that acknowledge the change of circumstances in the world."

This, he added, includes learning more than just religious knowledge. It necessitates an understanding of complexity of the world of science and technology.

"Muslims are urged to recognise all forms of knowledge, not only if they want to be modern and progressive, but if they want to be great Muslims," he said.

"The Prime Minister touched the very heart of what is being debated now, not only in Malaysia, not only Southeast Asia, but the whole world," he added.

"His formulations remind us of why Prime Minister Mahathir is recognised as a true spokesperson for a liberal-minded understanding of Islam and modernity," he added.

"The speech was wonderful, an eye-opener," said Dr Mohamed Fathi Osman of the US-based Institute for the Study of Islam in the contemporary world.

"Religion is meant to achieve benefits for humankind. The Quran is always speaking of the dignity of the children of Adam, not just Muslims."

Professor Clive Kessler from the University of New South Wales in Australia commented on the Prime Minister's strong words against the blind acquisition of knowledge.

"It is not enough simply to acquire; you have to create and generate knowledge," Kessler said.