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PM: Women will decide future of the country

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said the future of the country will be determined more by women who have demonstrated their ability to outshine men in many fields.

Paying tribute to Malaysian women at a gathering to mark Women's Day, the Prime Minister said in universities, 70 per cent of students were female.

He said more women were also being appointed to senior government positions such as secretaries-general. The Government recognised the role played by women as evident from the creation of a separate ministry to look into women's affairs.

However, Dr Mahathir said the Government was concerned about the future role of men and women in developing the country, especially in the era of knowledge and information technology.

He felt that both sides should shoulder the responsibilities together, saying this could only happen if the men were not left too far behind.

The Government also did not want to see a troubled society as a result of development.

"While we want women to work and contribute to the country, we also want the task of raising children and inculcating them with values be given priority. Women play an important role in the building of a happy family.

"We have heard of the many social ills affecting our children, partly due to a lack of parental attention. This is the danger of a modern society where both parents are working.

"This is the dilemma we face: do we revert to the time where women take charge in the upbringing of children? But if we do so, we will lose out in terms of manpower and competitiveness."

Dr Mahathir admitted the best solution had yet to be found.

He urged non-governmental organisations to seriously look into finding ways of striking a balance between building a happy family and women helping to develop the country.

He said societies which marginalised their women would be left behind compared with those which provided ample opportunities for the fairer sex to succeed.

"In some countries where women are segregated and victimised, they remain under-developed with peace difficult to attain."

In Malaysia, with women making up half the population, Dr Mahathir said the country's manpower would be reduced if women were denied the chance to work.

"As a result, we would become weaker compared with countries that do not neglect their women.

"They play an important role and this is a fact that we have to recognise. Therefore, do not belittle the contributions of women," he said to thunderous applause from the 15,000-strong crowd.

At a Press conference later, Dr Mahathir said besides finding the reasons behind the poor academic performance of male students, the Government could only motivate them to excel.

"We cannot give them something extra when the females do not get anything extra," he said when asked on steps to be taken by the Government to correct the imbalance in the number of female and male undergraduates in universities.

Dr Mahathir also said as many mothers were now working, teachers at

schools played a bigger part in moulding children.

"But this responsibility should not be left to moral and religious teachers alone. All teachers have to play their role."

Dr Mahathir said unfortunately, there were teachers who failed to discharge their responsibilities.

On the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English next year, Dr Mahathir said the Government was going ahead with preparations although public feedback was still being sought.

He said if no major problem was encountered, the plan would be implemented although some changes might be made.

"We are making progress. We are listening to views of the people. We are very democratic. We don't force things on them, we listen to them and we find the best solution eventually."

Dr Mahathir said the move was not about teachers' ability to teach the two subjects in English as they would act more as facilitators.

When pointed out that some rural schools were not equipped with computers, Dr Mahathir said all would be provided with adequate facilities.

On possible changes to the Government's current policies on language in future, Dr Mahathir said the Government wanted the people to learn Bahasa Malaysia because it was the national language.

"Everybody must learn Bahasa Malaysia. (But) people must also be fluent in English. We have always said Bahasa Malaysia is the national language and English the second language.

"But many learn Bahasa Malaysia only and neglect English, so much so that we now find our people unable to argue and debate with others."

To a question on the recurrence of haze following forest fires in Kalimantan, Dr Mahathir said one had to understand the problems faced by Indonesia.

"They do not have much funds to fight the fires. They have problems and other things to attend to, and we have to understand their position."

Dr Mahathir said the Government was looking into creating rain to reduce the haze.

Meanwhile, Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin said a third of the ministry's officers were working 'day and night' to prepare materials for the teaching of the two subjects in English next year.

"Of our 273,000 employees, 100,000 are involved in preparations," he said after launching an education portal at the Subang Jaya Vision School complex.

He said consultants from Britain would be brought in to supervise the teaching of the two subjects.