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PM: Rigid interpretation of Islam hindering progress

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Narrow, rigid and errant interpretations of Islam are hindering many of the world's Muslims from attaining their full potential in fields crucial to their security and survival, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"It is not Islam which obstructs our progress.

"It is the wrong and rigid inter-pretations which we are taught that hinder progress," the Prime Minister said in his keynote address at the Kuala Lumpur International Forum on Islam - Kalif 2002 - here today.

Speaking to an audience of international Islamic scholars and academicians, Dr Mahathir pointed out that knowledge was a tool to empower the ummah.

However, he added: "Pure knowledge will get us nowhere unless we learn how to apply that knowledge to our advantage or for the betterment of our lives."

In his much-anticipated keynote address entitled "The State of the Muslim World Today: Knowledge as a Tool of Muslim Political Empowerment", Dr Mahathir elaborated on how Islam had been misinterpreted and corrupted with negativity, leading to the decline of the Muslim world.

Observing that there was not a single Muslim country among today's developed nations, he said this was due to the "confined" thoughts and blind interpretations of the religion.

Recalling how electricity, mechanised vehicles and modern weaponry were deemed haram at one time or another, he said Muslims suffered great setbacks during the Industrial Revolution and were still suffering due to such injunctions.

"We may think that it is unrealistic, if not silly to label industrial products as haram, but in those days they were fanatically serious in considering them as haram," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Muslims must acquire knowledge while discarding negative values and attitudes.

"The majority of Muslims today do not believe in worldly well-being, including world security. They do not believe that Muslims can ever be as advanced as the developed countries.

"Instead they believe there is already a Muslim renaissance as evidenced by the obvious piety of more Muslims and their return to dress codes which are considered Muslim."

Calling on Muslims to reject the idea that knowledge of Islam was the only knowledge they needed, the Prime Minister urged the younger generation of Muslims to venture into all possible fields of knowledge.

He said Muslims worldwide should co-operate as a single force to enrich the ummah with knowledge, and consequently with political clout.

"In the quest for knowledge there must be division of labour. Within the Muslim community which numbers 1.3 billion, every field of knowledge can be pursued. And new fields must be uncovered all the time. And certainly there must always be an adequate number who pursue religious knowledge.

"This division of labour within the ummah will result not only in an empowered society but a balanced one."

In conclusion, Dr Mahathir said there was no "quick fix" but knowledge could raise and empower Muslim communities if the ummah was prepared to collectively overcome the hindrances in acquiring knowledge.

"It is easy to agree that knowledge is a tool for our political

empowerment but mere agreement is not going to lead us anywhere. We really do not need more seminars and conferences which will end up with the obvious conclusions.

"We need to act, and how we should act to implement the obvious is what should occupy our minds and our time now."

Earlier in his welcoming remarks, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was also patron of the forum today, expressed the hope that Kalif would evolve into an annual reference point for deliberating issues concerning the Islamic world.

He told the participants that Dr Mahathir was the most "qualified" person to set the tone for the forum as he was recognised worldwide as a successful Muslim leader.

"He has shown that Muslims can face the challenges of modernity, development, globalisation, pluralism and technological advancement. Modern Malaysia is a testament to his leadership.

"By stressing substance and not just form, he has been able to uplift the lives of Muslims in this country through peace, prosperity, justice and spiritual development," Abdullah said.

Speaking at a Press conference later, Dr Mahathir said Muslim scholars and academicans must strive to pull Islam out of the "web of misunderstanding" that had hampered the progress of the religion and its followers.

"There is still misunderstanding about Islam and it is necessary for us to clear these misconceptions. One way of doing this is of course to hold more inter-faith forums, involving Muslims and non-Muslims."