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Mahathir-Faith

MUSLIM LEADERS IN M'SIA WARY OF INTER-FAITH ASSOCIATION, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Zaharah Othman

LONDON, Feb 26 (Bernama) -- Muslim religious leaders are still "uncomfortable" about the setting up of an inter-faith association in Malaysia, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

He said as such, more patience was needed to reduce the discomfort among them.

He was speaking on Monday to about 80 guests, who were mostly Members of Parliament, at a reception hosted by Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green at the House of Lords.

Dr Mahathir said some conservative Muslims were fearful of being "infected" by other thoughts although he himself had no problems meeting leaders of other religious faiths such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism.

He told his audience that Malaysians had a wonderful tradition of the open house during which they would visit each other on their festive days despite having cultural and religious differences.

On the issue of translating Christian texts into Bahasa Malaysia, he said that the government was cautious in its approach because the usage of the same terms as in Islam would cause confusion among Muslims.

He added that this situation would not arise once the people were more educated.

The Sabah Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia, he said, were freely in use as the people there were familiar with terms used in both holy books.

In his address earlier, Dr Mahathir said Islam was greatly misunderstood in the West which equated religious extremism with fundamentalism when in fact, the fundamentals of Islam preached peace and tolerance.

"If we follow the fundamental tenets of Islam, we are moderates, accepting and respecting religious differences and trying to accommodate people of other faiths. Islam abhors turmoil," he said.

The prime minister said the majority of Muslims in Malaysia adhered to the fundamentals of Islam.

"We want to ensure that extremist (religious) views do not get the upper hand. We have our hands full trying to prevent misuse of religion," he said.

Dr Mahathir accused PAS of misinterpreting Islam and criticised the party for its narrow stand on the role of Muslim women in society.

This, he said, was in sharp contrast to the encouragement of Umno, one of the components of the ruling coalition in Malaysia, for women to participate fully in the development of the country.

He said that as a result of this, Muslim women had risen to the challenge.

Dr Mahathir said women held senior posts in all sectors, citing the example of Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz who is Bank Negara Governor, as well as those in the business world where they made good managers and even fighter pilots.

However, the prime minister was unhappy with the poor response of Muslim males to higher education, saying that there was a need to redress the imbalance as some of them were neglecting their studies for politics.

He told the gathering that some 70 per cent of Muslim undergraduates in Malaysia were female.

"Half the Muslim population in Malaysia are women, and if deprived of

opportunities to advance, then the Muslim society will be weakened," said Dr Mahathir.

Earlier, in her welcoming address, Baroness Uddin praised Malaysia's multi-racial society for its harmony saying that the country had much to offer the world in ethnic and community relations as well as providing opportunities for women to advance.

Dr Mahathir, she told the gathering, was "truly a global citizen".

She praised the prime minister for his strong views on issues such as debt relief, poverty eradication and for standing up for the interests of Third World countries.

Dr Mahathir had earlier met British Prime Minister Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street to express Malaysia's views on terrorism.

He will end his five-day working visit to London tomorrow when he will fly back to Malaysia.

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