

13 FEB 2003

Mahathir-National

NATIONAL SCHOOLS TO BE RESTRUCTURED, SAYS DR M

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 13 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that the national school system will be restructured to make such schools more attractive to all races.

The Prime Minister said the revamp would see national schools providing curricula and subjects that catered adequately to all students.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Umno president, said the national school system had been changed so much that it now lacked the characteristics of national schools.

"It has been changed because they wish to emphasise the characteristics of Malayness; they wish to plant elements of the Islamic religion in these schools.

"All national schools have become Malay Islamic schools," he said when delivering a presidential address at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) here.

About 5,000 Umno delegates from throughout the country attended the special briefing, which was held to explain the government's move to stop financial aid to Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR).

Dr Mahathir said the mother tongues of non-Malays should be taught in national schools but this was not followed, prompting Chinese and Indians to reject national schools, which they considered to have been turned into Malay schools and Islamic religious schools.

The situation was compounded by the existence of certain restrictions which caused many non-Malay parents to send their children to national-type schools (SJK), he said.

"Now we don't call it bahasa kebangsaan (national language), we call it bahasa Melayu. We have actually fertilised national-type schools, so much so that there are thousands of students," he said.

Dr Mahathir said SJK, which at one time had lost their shine, had become popular again because national schools were deemed unattractive.

He said the action of non-Malays in opting for SJK had emptied national schools of non-Malays when they should be mixing with Muslims to know them better.

"At least in a multi-racial country, non-Muslims (should) get close to Muslims to know that we are not terrorists," he said.

Dr Mahathir said what was more disappointing was that these national schools which had become "Malay schools" had been rejected by the Malays themselves, as many of their children had switched from national schools to SAR.

He said this happened although SAR did not have quality, proper syllabi, trained teachers and the characteristics of a school.

"Non-Malays shun national schools because they are too Malay and Islamic, and Muslims and Malays leave national schools because they are (considered) not Islamic enough," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the country required people who possessed wide knowledge, including in professional fields, and not just religious knowledge.

If the people did not possess knowledge other than that related to religion, the country would become weak and could be easily oppressed, he said.

"We want to provide adequate foundations; we want to give this in national schools together with knowledge other than on the Islamic

religion," he said.

At a dialogue with the delegates later, Dr Mahathir said he received a preliminary report on the restructuring of national schools today but had yet to read it.

At a press conference later, Dr Mahathir said the revamp of the national school system would not affect its image to the extent of driving away non-Muslim students.

The change would be aimed more at improving the teaching of Islamic studies at national schools and not to turn national schools into religious schools, he said.

"We will increase lessons on Islamic religion which meet the requirements of Islam, but it will be done without jeopardising the image of national schools," he said.

Asked when the revamp would be effected, he said the government needed some time as the matter should be debated and implemented with care.

"We want to ensure that the syllabus meets the requirements of Islam and we are looking at the model in Johor...there are also other models and proposals," he said.

However, the government would try to settle this as soon as possible, he said.

Asked if Umno was worried that the government's move might have a negative impact on the party in the next general election, he said: "It will be worrisome to PAS because they want to preserve the school but we want to preserve the teachings of Islam."

"So they are praying for the school, we are praying for Islam."

Asked on the proposed debate between Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz and PAS Youth deputy chief Salahuddin Ayub on SAR, Dr Mahathir said it would proceed.

"We want to see what PAS wants to lie about; we give them a chance and we will record what they say," he said. The debate is scheduled to be held on Sunday.

Asked on the successor to Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, whose term under the rotation system ends this March 27, Dr Mahathir said he would discuss the matter with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

-- BERNAMA

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