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Mahathir-Islam (Wrap-up)

SETTING THE PATH TOWARDS UNITING THE UMMAH

By: Mokhtar Hussain

DAMASCUS, Aug 19 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's two-day visit to Syria may have been brief but it was significant for it not only strengthened ties between the two Muslim nations but also set the path towards the revival of Islamic glory.

The visit can be considered a big success in terms of enhancing ties, based on the signing of 12 agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) between the two governments and their private sectors.

However, the more interesting events were three dialogue sessions which the prime minister had with the business community, Islamic scholars and the think-tank of the government of Syria.

It was at the luncheon talks with some 200 Islamic scholars or "ulama" in the city of Damascus, where Islam reigned during the period of Umayyads, that Dr Mahathir spoke of the need for today's Muslims to acquire knowledge to bring back the glory of Islam.

"Some of us say that we need not acquire modern knowledge, that it is secular knowledge, that we only need to study the religion and theology, and that other knowledge can't bring us any merit.

"As a result, Muslims are intellectually backward and are incapable of competing with the detractors and enemies of Islam," he said.

He said the Muslims began to weaken at the beginning of the last century after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire which was divided into many nation states.

"The states were not united, instead they were subjected to pressure and manipulation by outside forces. The Muslims became weaker and weaker, and more and more ignorant," he said in reply to a question from one of the scholars.

He said Muslims were more interested in minor differences in the interpretations of Islam. "There is only one religion of Islam but we are divided into many different sects and, because we have different beliefs, there is conflict between us and such conflict merely weakens us."

Dr Mahathir also referred to the confusion of Muslims in Malaysia following an opposition party leader's contention that Allah is a rogue and that Allah uses obscene words.

"I tried to find in the Quran if there is any obscene word, there is none. So, when we have Islamic scholars more interested in politics, you are going to have wrong interpretations of Islam. It confuses the Muslim ummah, which one is right?" he said.

Dr Mahathir was given a warm welcome by the Syrian government during his visit due to his stature as a prominent Muslim leader and Malaysia being a successful, modern and moderate Islamic country.

Dr Mahathir said that his perception of Islam had been broadened when he visited the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus "because in the mosque is the crypt where the head of St John the Baptist was supposed to have been kept."

"To find a Christian relic inside a mosque is, of course, something that is unusual.

"Certainly, it'll be a shock for Malaysians, but it is clear that it is the teaching of Islam that we must respect the religion of others," he said.

The prime minister was also asked whether he believed in the alleged conspiracy of the Jews in the Asian financial crisis.

To that, Dr Mahathir explained at length that the Jews, who numbered only 30 million in the world, wanted to control the world, which was a Zionist ambition and not that of their religion.

He claimed that the Jews hoped to achieve that by controlling the most powerful country in the world -- the United States.

"By controlling the press and media, controlling the money through banking, and controlling now the Congress, they have become the power in the United States," Dr Mahathir said.

On terrorism, the prime minister said it was important to give a correct definition of the act as "we do not want the independent fighters to be called terrorists".

"The Israeli government can avoid committing acts of terror because they have the means, they don't have to carry out acts of terror. The Palestinians, they have no aeroplanes, no tanks, no nothing; the only way they can fight back is the way they fight back. They may carry out suicide bombing.

"We cannot hit out at people because we are angry and frustrated. But merely to kill people who are innocent because of our anger is not right. To kill people, not the person who hit us, is wrong. We must admit that it is wrong."

During a dialogue with the think-tank comprising Members of Parliament, cabinet minister and scholars and leaders of private sectors, the prime minister spoke on how Muslim countries could be united.

He said: "There is strength in unity. If you're united, even if you're poor, even if you're weak, you can be very strong. Fifty-four Muslims countries speaking with one voice can achieve a lot more than one strong Muslim country shouting in any place."

Dr Mahathir suggested that Muslim countries begin by agreeing on at least one issue with regards to the problem facing Muslims in the world.

"Well, the chairmanship of the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference) is with the country, not with the individual. So, after I step down, my successor will take over from me. And he is equally dedicated to the policies that we have made with regard to our role among the Islamic countries. The most important thing of course is to have unity.

"Pick up at least one issue where we can agree. I think we can agree at least on the Palestinian question. We must give full backing for the suffering of the Palestinian people or we can have one united view on the Iraq issue."

He urged them to avoid talking about different systems of administration like the monarchy, republican or socialist, saying that these were divisive issues.

At a news conference, Dr Mahathir was asked how he could contribute towards the betterment of the ummah as he would be stepping down in October.

He said that every Muslim, as a member of ummah, had to contribute, "even if you're a small-time trader".

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