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'Mutual respect key to better relations'

Carolyn Hong

MUTUAL respect is the key to harmonious and better relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

Responding to a question of how Muslims should relate to non-Muslims, he said it must be remembered that four-fifths of the world comprised non-Muslims.

"That is a fact. Some of us who live in Muslim-majority countries tend to forget that there are plenty of us who live in non-Muslim countries.

"As much as we do not like non-Muslims to ill-treat us in countries where they are the majority, we should not ill-treat non-Muslims in the countries where we are the majority.

"If we stick to that, there will be no problem," he said at a dialogue with academicians and diplomats after his talk on "Islam and the Ummah" at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London on Monday.

The dialogue was moderated by Prof Muhammad Abdel Haleem, director of SOAS' Centre of Islamic Studies.

In line with the theme of his talk - that Muslims should return to the fundamentals of Islam - Dr Mahathir said the Quran had already prescribed the way Muslims were to interact with non-Muslims. "To them their religion, to us our religion."

He added that in Malaysia, Muslims lived peacefully with non-Muslims because they practised what was taught in the Quran - respect for each other.

To a question comparing young Malaysian Muslim women whose dress is increasingly conservative and the earlier generation of women who hold prominent public office, Dr Mahathir said it was true that more women now wear the tudung.

"If you want to cover your head, by all means. If you are a pilot of a fighter plane, you can cover your head but make sure that you can hear."

He said Malaysian Muslim women were successful and got along well with non-Muslims because they had open minds.

"The dress can be conservative but the mind must not be conservative."

He added that the exclusion of women from public life would only deprive the Muslim community of the talents of half the 1.3 billion Muslim population worldwide.

Dr Mahathir, however, noted that Islam was not about dress alone.

On the concept of justice in Islam, he said substance was more important than the form, and a law did not have to sound "Islamic" to be Islamic.

Justice was the most important element, and in a multi-religious society, the law had to be just to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

For instance, he said, it could not be just, or Islamic, to punish a victim of a crime while letting the criminal go free because the victim failed to bring four witnesses to the crime.

Dr Mahathir said there were now modern scientific methods such as DNA technology.

"Are we to reject this as scientific nonsense?" he asked.

He said the democracy of today was hardly a democracy as the minority had become more important than the majority.

He cited the example of a case in the United States where a man had

opened a cinema showing pornographic films in a conservative suburb. The court allowed him to do so on the ground that it was his right.

Dr Mahathir said that to him the most important element of democracy was the ability to change the Government without revolution or violence.

The majority govern the country but the rights of both the minority and majority must be protected.

On his message to US President George W. Bush on the eve of his address to the United Nations General Assembly, Dr Mahathir said: "It's a democratic country, a democratic world. He can say what he likes, and I will say what I like."