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Let's prove Muslims are not second-class people, says Dr M

reports on "OIC Summit 2003" by Ashraf Abdullah; Kamarulzaman Salleh; PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today challenged the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to prove to the world that Muslims are not second-class people destined to lag behind the developed West.

He urged Muslim countries to learn from their past mistakes and seize the opportunity to jointly develop their industrial and trading capabilities.

"Today, we have to catch up and we can catch up, because Muslims are just as intelligent as anybody else. Obviously, Islam is not just about preaching religion but also about trade.

"Trade and economic activities do help to increase the wealth and influence of the Muslims."

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the opening of the Expo OIC 2003 at the expo site near the Putrajaya Convention Centre.

The expo is being held in conjunction with the 10th OIC Summit. Over 500 exhibitors from more than 30 countries are participating in the expo, which is the largest outdoor exhibition ever organised in Malaysia.

"We should be able to do what others can do, and we all know that today we are left far behind in terms of our industrial capacity and our trading abilities. This happened because for a long time we did not pay attention to this field."

Dr Mahathir said Muslims had become laggards in the industrial era because of the mistaken notion that Islam rejected progress and technology. This, he said, was due to wrong interpretation of the religion.

He pointed out how Muslims missed the industrial revolution "completely" because there were some Muslim countries which rejected the products of industry as being un-Islamic.

The Prime Minister then related his own experience as examples.

"I remember when I was a small boy, we were told that you should not use electricity in mosques because it is a non-Muslim invention.

"Some believed we could not have the hearse on a motorised vehicle and that it must be carried on one's shoulders."

These incidents, said Dr Mahathir, were examples of incorrect interpretations of Islam.

Giving another example, the Prime Minister said the Turkish Government banned printing presses when it was first introduced in the country because it was supposedly wrong to print anything, much more the Quran.

"Today, we look upon all this and say it was just ridiculous, but at one time that was the belief.

"If we had not been held back by such wrong interpretations, then we would have been as advanced in industry as anybody else.

"But we cannot just cry over spilt milk. What happened before is for us to remember."

Dr Mahathir said it was a shame how many intelligent and capable Muslims had to migrate to richer countries to apply their capacities to research and invent new things.

"We have lost a lot of our brains to Western countries simply because we do not pay them well enough and because we do not have the facilities to enable them to do research and develop new technologies.

"So we are left behind even when we have the people to contribute

towards our advancement."

Dr Mahathir said he hoped that the expo would enable Muslim countries to do more business and engage in more trade with each other and, above all, to understand that Muslims were as capable as others.

He said he was glad that the expo was being held because it showcased the industrial capacity and the products of largely Muslim countries.

"We have not been able to get everyone here but we have a good number of countries participating in this expo."

Elaborating on the importance of trade for the success of the ummah, the Prime Minister cited Malaysia's own experience with Islam as an example.

He said historically, Islam came to Malaysia not through armies or conquest, but through the trade spillover from the Indonesian islands.

It was Muslim traders from the Arabian peninsula and from India who came to Malaysia to trade. Being well off and knowledgeable about the world, they were able not just to trade, but to demonstrate to the locals the virtues of Islam.

"As a result, the Malays embraced Islam, and the Malays (from then on) were Muslims."

So all encompassing were the Malays' adoption of Islam that today, "all Malays are by the Constitution considered Muslims", said Dr Mahathir.

He explained how in Malaysia, a person was not a Malay unless he was a Muslim.

"Such is the adherence to the religion which came here some 600 years ago, when the Muslim traders came to Malaysia to trade."

The success of the traders was noted by the locals, and in particular by the Rulers of the Malay States, and was the reason why the Malays were attracted to Islam in the first place.

Dr Mahathir explained that Malaysia was determined to prove to the world its capability to become a global manufacturer.

"Quite naturally, Malaysia, as the host country, has the biggest number of companies exhibiting. We would like to show that we are as capable as anyone else to produce goods for the consumption of the world, and not just the Muslim world."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia realised that trade was not confined to any particular religion.

"When Muslims trade, we trade with the rest of the world."

Dr Mahathir said the many exhibits at the expo would be able to reflect the capacity of the Muslim countries and the ummah.

"We have a need to show this capacity and ability in order to convince ourselves that we are not second class in any way.

"We can do what others can do and in Malaysia, this is a creed; that Malaysia can do what others can do."

Dr Mahathir explained to the foreign delegates and guests among the audience that the country's national creed, known as "Malaysia Boleh" or "Malaysia Can", is to promote the belief that Malaysia could do what others could.

"I am also quite sure that the Muslim world can do what others can do, and when you have confidence in yourselves and you try, I am quite sure we will not be left behind, or remain impoverished and not have the facilities to protect and defend ourselves.

"We will then be able to stand up for our religion and our people."