

21/02/2003

Schooling hours may be extended to accommodate religious studies

By Ainon Mohd; Patrick Sennyah

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Schooling hours may be extended to accommodate religious studies in all national schools, Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Describing the teaching of Islam in national schools as shallow and lacking substance, he said the new curriculum on religious studies would be more comprehensive to help the students to be better Muslims.

Dr Mahathir said the present teaching sometimes over-emphasised petty issues, citing as an example the colour of skull caps Muslims should wear, which totally neglected the basic Islamic education, "Another consideration is to emulate the system used in Johor," he said after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting here.

In Johor, students are required to attend normal classes in the morning and religious classes in the afternoon.

The Johor religious school system was established in 1918 and has grown to be the most comprehensive system available for basic Islamic education in the country at present.

Reiterating that the Government would stop funding privately-run religious schools (Sekolah Agama Rakyat), Dr Mahathir said Arabic might be taught in national schools to those students who want to pursue Islamic education in depth.

"We will finalise this when we formulate the new curriculum," he added.

He said religious teachers now seemed only to emphasise the here-after.

"When we pray we must not only do so for the hereafter, but also for our present needs and well-being," he said.

Last week, Dr Mahathir said the Government had set up a committee headed by former Education director-general Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor to restructure the national school curriculum to make it attractive to all the races in the country.

He had said if sufficient time was allocated for religious studies in national schools, Malays would not go to SAR.

"We also do not want Chinese or Indian families rejecting national schools and sending their children to national-type schools, thinking that national schools are only for Malays and are emphasising Islam.

"Neither do we want Malays to resort to SAR because they claim that religious studies taught in national schools are insufficient," he had said at a briefing for Umno leaders from the 165 divisions nationwide on SAR.

On a separate issue, Dr Mahathir said he was proud of the achievements of Puteri Umno and urged all parties, including Wanita and Umno Youth, to accept them as part of Umno.

"(Puteri) must be given proper guidance to play an effective role in Umno's struggles," he added.

Dr Mahathir also said the supreme council was very proud of the victory achieved by Hafiz Hashim who won the All-England badminton championship.

"His fighting spirit and determination should be an example to all Malaysians," he said.

On rewarding his achievements, Dr Mahathir said it must be in moderation so as not to spoil him.

(END)