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Schools to be restructured (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Government has set up a committee headed by former Education director-general Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor to restructure the national school system to make it attractive to all the races in the country.

Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, disclosing this today, said if sufficient time was allocated for religious studies in national schools, the Malays would not go to privately-run People's Religious Schools (Sekolah Agama Rakyat).

"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 the Malays and are emphasising Islam.

"At the same time, we also do not want the Malays to resort to Sekolah Agama Rakyat because they claim that religious studies taught in national schools are insufficient," he said when briefing Umno leaders from the 165 divisions nationwide in a special session on Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

Dr Mahathir said the briefing was to clarify that the Government was not closing SAR, but that it had stopped funding such schools.

He added that the committee had submitted its preliminary report to him this morning and that they would be looking at various models for the new education system.

Later at a Press conference, Dr Mahathir said no time frame was given to the committee to complete the study.

"It will take time. There are many considerations as we want to ensure the syllabus for Islamic studies in national schools is in line with the true teachings of Islam," he added.

Dr Mahathir told the Umno leaders that there were even party members who had questioned the Government for stopping the funding for SAR and felt the move would be exploited by the Opposition in the next general election.

He said when the schools were first set up, the Government provided funding because it was under the impression that the true teachings of Islam were being taught and such schools would help spread Islamic teachings.

"However, we later found out that the teachers there had deviated from such teachings and SAR students were taught to hate the Government and other Muslims.

"If we continue to fund these schools, it would mean that we are actually in collaboration with them."

"If parents want to continue sending their children there, they will learn nothing else but politics of hate and political ideologies which are against Islam," he said.

He said these schools were only using Islam as a front to deceive parents into sending their children there, just like Pas which claims to be an Islamic party but is instead only keen on spreading lies and rumours.

Dr Mahathir said children must receive sufficient religious education, but it must be done in moderation.

"This committee will ensure students learn Islamic studies systematically, according to their age and standard. The students must be able to absorb what they learn," he said.

He said under the new national school system, students would be given sufficient time for Islamic studies and, at the same time, emphasis would also be given to all the other subjects.

"This is unlike SAR where Mathematics, Science and other subjects are neglected and students are only taught religion," he said.

He said some parents sent their children to SAR because they felt guilty about not attending religious schools themselves, while others believed that it would actually cleanse their sins and help them gain a place in syurga (paradise).

"What parents do not realise is that the teachers in SAR are not qualified and do not adhere to any set standards of teaching.

"What will happen if our children only learnt religion and nothing else. There would be no more doctors, engineers or other professionals in the country," he said.

He said if everyone were to learn only about religion, there would be no more jobs available for them.

"It is not that I do not believe in Islam and do not pray. But if I had neglected my other studies, how could I have led the country to become a model Islamic state which has gained worldwide recognition?"

When the country attained independence, Dr Mahathir said only six to 10 per cent of the doctors in the country were Malays, but today they formed more than 40 per cent.

He also said there were cases of SAR trying to cheat the Government by not informing it when students left the school so that they could continue getting funds for more students.