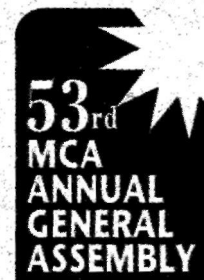




"Yes, Malaysians may be more mature now, but issues like race and religion are still sensitive, even a mature country like America is sensitive about race and religion."

Abdullah

'LOANS FOR ALL RACES'



Reports by Chow Kum Hor, Eileen Ng, Koh Lay Chin and Deborah Loh

PM tells SME Bank and government institutions not to discriminate against anyone

Abdullah and Ong at the general assembly yesterday. With them are MCA deputy president and Transport Minister Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy (left) and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

KUALA LUMPUR: The SME Bank and other government-lending institutions for entrepreneurs must not discriminate against non-Malay businessmen applying for loans.

This was the Prime Minister's response to grouses from Chinese small- and medium-size enterprises and it drew strong applause from delegates at the MCA's 53rd annual general assembly yesterday.

"The SME Bank should not discriminate against any party. It should provide aid to all applicants regardless of race," Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said in his opening address at the meeting.

He added that such problems were also raised by Chinese ministers at the Cabinet level and discussed "openly and honestly".

"I have taken note of what Ong had said in his speech about the complaints by Chinese businessmen," he added, referring to the presidential address earlier by

MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting.

Earlier this month, Ong led a group of Chinese businessmen from guilds and associations in a three-hour dialogue with Abdullah on economic issues and challenges faced by non-Malay entrepreneurs.

Abdullah said the Government wanted to enlarge the economic pie as it would then be easier to share. For example, he said, a small Chinese family-owned shop could consider partnering with Malay landowners to enlarge and diversify their business by selling products to all races and employing a multi-racial workforce.

"This is what I mean by enlarging the pie to share the benefits."

He also reassured the Chinese community over some racial remarks that had caused uneasiness.

He said Umno appreciated the "loyal friendship" of MCA during its difficult times.

"Whatever the problem, we still

see the tolerance, moderation and consensus of Barisan Nasional-component parties.

"As BN chairman, I understand my responsibility to the coalition and the people who come from different races and practise different religions."

He said some people were still discussing Article 121(a) of the Federal Constitution on the jurisdiction of Syariah and civil courts and other sensitive issues.

They thought that since Malaysians were now more mature, the Government should allow the discussion to continue, he added.

"Yes, Malaysians may be more mature now, but issues like race and religion are still sensitive, even a mature country like America is sensitive about race and religion.

"As human beings, we can't avoid feeling sensitive when race and religion are brought up. If we can't control the problems as a result (of uncontrolled discussion),

then it is better to avoid them.

"When one party raises an argument, another party responds and so on. My advice to everyone is not to raise issues that would make things difficult for all of us."

On Chinese national-type schools, he said it was important to ensure the pupils were taught how to live in a multiracial country and to avoid racial prejudices.

"This also goes for students in other vernacular schools and religious schools."

Later, after launching the National Watercolour Arts Festival at the National Art Gallery, Abdullah advised leaders to be careful when making political statements.

His statement was also directed at deputy Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin over his recent statements that drew the ire of MCA and the Chinese community.

Khairy had stated while opening an Umno Youth division meeting that the Chinese would take

advantage of Malay disunity if Umno was not united.

"My advice to Khairy and other leaders is that we ought to be careful when making statements, as some statements when made in relation to specific issues can cause misunderstanding.

"In Barisan Nasional, we have parties that represent different races so we should be careful when speaking about specific issues," he said, adding that Khairy should explain what he meant by his statement since it had turned into an issue.

Khairy, who is also Abdullah's son-in-law, had claimed that he was misunderstood and had never intended to hurt the feelings of the Chinese community.

Asked if he considered Khairy's statement as extremist and whether he (Khairy) should apologise, Abdullah said it depended on what exactly he had said and meant.

He said he was not entirely certain about Khairy's remarks.