

Bishops: Set up parliamentary panel
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JOHOR BARU, Jan 11: Christians here welcomed the Prime Minister's statement on the need to clarify laws governing religious conversions.

In a Press statement issued at the end of the annual Conference of Bishops of Malaysia here today, Archbishop Datuk Murphy Pakiam called on Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to set up a parliamentary select committee to decide the matter.

"This is an issue of profound importance and significance to all Malaysians," he said, urging the Government to consider repealing Article 121(1)(A) of the Federal Constitution.

Abdullah, commenting on the matter in Kepala Batas yesterday, did not say which laws should be examined, nor did he indicate if the Constitution needed to be amended, but he said he was aware of the undercurrents following the tussle over former army commando M. Moorthy's religious status.

He said to prevent any confusion among Malaysians, laws governing religious conversions needed to be made clearer.

Towards this end, Pakiam said the Catholic Bishops believed that Article 121(1)(A) of the Constitution should be repealed. The High Court ruled that this clause gives the Syariah Court jurisdiction over matters of Islam, even when the dispute involved a non-Muslim party.

"We also ask the Government to restore sovereign power to the civil courts to rule in cases involving non-Muslims in Islamic affairs," he said.

Reverend Dr Hermen Shastri, general secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia, said the council was glad the PM had promised to look into the matter.

"We feel that serious consideration should be given to Article 121(1)(A) of the Constitution as in its present interpretation, it has definitely blurred the lines of jurisdiction between the Civil and Syariah courts.

"Civil courts should be seen to protect and uphold justice for citizens in regard to fundamental liberties guaranteed by the Federal Constitution," he said.

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