

Panel wants Institute of Ethnic Relations set up

NST-13/7/2007

■ **By Hamidah Atan and Deborah Loh**
news@nst.com.my

PUTRAJAYA: Members of the National Unity Advisory Panel have proposed the formation of an Institute of Ethnic Relations to manage the issue of national unity and integration.

The 55-member panel which had its first meeting yesterday, chaired by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Dr Maximus J. Ongkili, felt that the time had come for a proper institute to be set up to document success stories in the management of inter and intra-racial unity.

"Members suggested that this institute be formed in collaboration with the universities and be run under the Prime Minister's Department. We have formed a committee to talk to the universities," Ongkili said.

The institute would study and carry out research on unity.

"It is timely for Malaysia to have

this institute.

This is also in line with the call by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that we should document our successes so that other nations can learn from our practices and approaches in handling unity issues and so on."

Abdullah handed letters of appointment to panel members at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC) on Wednesday.

They will meet again in Sarawak on Sept 10.

Ongkili said the committee would take about three months to prepare a working paper on the institute and submit it to the cabinet.

He said he was happy with the quality of discussion by members of the panel.

"They are taking the cue from the prime minister to speak sincerely, not to sweep everything under the carpet, but to speak with a deep sense of patriotism," said Ongkili.

At the end of yesterday's meet-

ing, four committees had also been formed — the religious relations committee chaired by ex-Kota Baru MP Ilani Isahak; economic development by Zecon Engineering Bhd chairman, Datuk Dr Hatta Solhi; education by Malaysian Human Rights (Suhakam) commissioner, Tan Sri Asiah Abu Samah, and social and security committee by ex-Teluk Kemang MP, Datuk Dr T. Marimuthu.

The religious relations committee would hold seminars and workshops while the committee on economic development would be dealing with issues like disparity in income.

"Disparity causes unhappiness and frustration and it can also bring dire consequences to inter- and intra-race relations," said Ongkili.

The education committee was tasked with getting participation from undergraduates and schoolchildren in unity programmes.

"Members feel that central to

education is the tenet (Rukun Negara). They have suggested that it be taught as a subject and as one of the examination papers. I will also bring this up with the cabinet."

The social and security committee would be responsible for getting the people, particularly youth, to be involved in volunteer patrol schemes such as Rukun Tetangga.

During the meeting, members were briefed by the police on the number of fights between people of different races.

According to the police, there had been a 15 per cent increase in the number fights in the past one year.

Ongkili said 70 per cent of the cases started with fights between groups or individuals from different races which then led to conflicts.

"It becomes racial conflicts when more people join the fray and this clearly shows that the tolerance level among Malaysians is still not strong enough."