

Hold inter-faith talks for unity, says panel

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A PARLIAMENTARY panel has called on the Prime Minister's Department to organise inter-faith dialogues among religious leaders to promote harmony among the races.

The Parliamentary Select Committee on Unity and National Service is recommending that the Prime Minister's Department put in place a body or mechanism to supervise and manage these discussions.

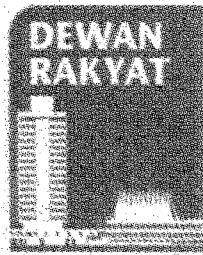
"We feel religious representatives should always be given the opportunity and space to hold dialogues among themselves in a harmonious environment," said the committee in its report tabled yesterday.

The committee is also recommending that the Education Act 1996 be amended to allow the teaching of religions other than Islam in government schools to be financed by public funds. Currently, public funds can only be applied towards the teaching of Islam.

"Section 51(a) of the Act should be amended as government revenue is collected from all contributors, taxpayers and various sectors regardless of ethnicity and religion."

It said the recommendation comes from opinions voiced by non-governmental organisations, associations and individuals at its public hearings during its two-year tenure.

"We found that many of the opinions touched on the importance of racial unity and national integration in the in-



■ Reports by V. Vasudevan and Anis Ibrahim

terests of economic stability and a peaceful and harmonious environment.

"Among the points stressed were the racial composition in the civil service, religious practices and the distribution of wealth. Our recommendations are based on these opinions and responses by relevant government departments."

While a specific National Unity and Integrity Policy was unnecessary as such principles already existed in the Federal Constitution, Rukun Negara and the National Education Policy, the committee felt that a "multi-culturalism policy" was needed.

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"We also recommend that there be a 'Unity Impact Assessment' to make sure that

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The Parliamentary Select Committee on Unity and National Service

development programmes do not deviate from the road to unity and integrity in tandem with development."

The report, which also looks at the present education system and how it affects national unity, takes a strong view of race-based clubs in schools.

"The setting up of racially-based school clubs and associations should be restricted."

"Such clubs segregate students and their activities into their own ethnic groups, rather than benefit them."

All students should also be taught about various world civilisations and religions.

"Important principles such as values and morals, consistent in all faiths, should be taught during the students' re-

spective religious lessons."

The 11-member committee headed by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili is also recommending that membership in Integration or Rukun Negara clubs be made compulsory for students.

On National Service, it said trainers and educators should improve their expertise in their respective areas.

"Trainers should also be made up of various ethnic groups, not just to reflect the programme's philosophy but to ensure that its effectiveness and objectives are achieved."

The report, with 12 recommendations, is the committee's first after its inception in December 2004.