

Inter-cultural dialogue 'is the way forward'

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DIALOGUE between cultures and civilisations has now become another pre-condition to achieving the global goals of peace, security and prosperity, the prime minister said.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said dialogue could bridge the gap and generate greater understanding between cultures and civilisations especially between the West and the world of Islam.

"This dialogue is essential to expose and establish the fact that Islam is a religion which espouses universalism, not exclusivity. Islam is a religion which does not make any distinction between race or culture," he said in his keynote address upon being conferred an honorary doctorate by Meiji University president Hiromi Naya here.

The university had specially requested Abdullah to speak on Islam and Islam Hadhari for his keynote address on "Bridging the Gap Between Cultures and Civilisations".

Abdullah also stressed the importance of governments' support for inter-cultural or inter-civilisational dialogue, as the root cause of conflict now is not religious but political and strategic in nature.

"There is no possibility of creating a true alliance of civilisations except with the involvement of governments, ideally through multilateral processes of inter-governmental deliberations such as at the United Nations.

"The role of government remains critical because governments have the power of enforcement, including preventing the recurrence of future conflicts.

"Above all, dialogues cannot be effective unless we are able to establish our common goals and values. We need the governments of the world to provide guarantees that these goals and values will endure."

There is no evidence in history which pointed to religion as the cause for the current conflict or for the rise of hostility between West-

ern and Muslim societies, he said.

Explanation is to be found in the repeated use of force or other machinations by the powerful over the weak to secure political, strategic or territorial gains.

"Religious teachings can and should be used to promote an appreciation of other religions, civilisations and ways of life of those professing other religions," he said.

Abdullah said the conflict in Palestine was the single most important factor perpetuating the tension between the West in general and the Muslim world as a whole.

The Islamic world sees the actions of Israel in the Middle East as being supported by powerful Western countries, either openly or tacitly, supposedly in defence of the Judeo-Christian tradition against the spread of radical militant Islam, thus legitimising all of Israel's actions, no matter how brutal.

Add this to the invasion of

Afghanistan, the conquest of Iraq, the aggression against Lebanon and the continuing occupation of the Golan Heights, and the Muslim world sees a concerted complicity to humiliate Muslims as a people and Islam as their religion.

"As such, any and all efforts at bridging the gap between the Christian West and the world of Islam must give priority to the resolution of the problem."

Malaysia's contribution to the better understanding of Islam is Islam Hadhari, which serves as a reminder to Muslims and a revelation to non-Muslims that the religion is tolerant, progressive and peace-loving.

"Islam Hadhari is not a new religion. It is not a new sect, *mahzab* or school of thought. It is simply an exposition of the true nature of Islam," he said.

"Abiding by the principles of Islam Hadhari would add value to human capital and would enable it to become more valuable assets to society."