

# NSTP-Utusan Melayu merger for financial reasons, says Abdullah

NST- 5/12/2006

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Any merger between the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd and Utusan Melayu group would be to strengthen the resources available to both groups.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday if the much-talked-about merger were to go through, it would be for financial reasons.

He said the papers would retain their respective identities, as he had urged before.

"As far as editorial content is concerned, they will remain the same. This (merger) is for financial reasons. If they pool their resources, they will save money.

"What we want to do is build (the two groups) by combining their strengths and resources. As for the way the merger will take place, it is up to those involved,"

he told reporters after chairing the first meeting of the National Innovation Council and presenting the National Innovation Awards at the Putra World Trade Centre.

However, Abdullah would not comment on whether the merger would take place.

The prime minister, nevertheless, dismissed worries that the exercise would affect Press freedom. (See also page 40)

On another matter, Abdullah said he hoped the state religious councils would soon issue a *fatwa* against a movement, said to be using a company as a front, which was trying to revive the banned Al-Arqam movement.

"We cannot allow that to happen. However, the company can continue to operate if it does not help promote deviant teachings,"

he said when commenting on Ruffaqa Corporation Sdn Bhd, a company which is 78 per cent owned by former Al-Arqam leader Ashaari Muhammad.

Senior officers of the company have insisted that it was a legitimate business enterprise and was not involved in the revival of the movement.

Selangor religious officers recently detained six people, including two Ruffaqa officials, on suspicion that they were trying to revive Al-Arqam. All have since been released.

The company's business interests include restaurants, hotels, health clinics and bakeries. Ruffaqa has investments in Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Jordan.

■ INTERVIEW WITH ASHAARI: P4