

# Lessons to be learned from fiery speeches

NST-28/11/2006

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** Non-Malays and non-Muslims should not be alarmed over some of the speeches at the recent Umno general assembly, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said last night.

In fact, said the prime minister and party president, there were lessons to be learnt from the speeches and the reaction they generated.

He said delegates touched on race and religion as they were still sensitive issues to the Malays.

"But some of the speeches did not go down well among some quarters. They saw the proceedings on TV as this was the first time the assembly was telecast live.

"Instead of getting alarmed, there are lessons to be learnt from the whole episode. It means all of us have to be careful in dealing with issues concerning race and religion."

He said this at the end of his speech at the United Nations Association of Malaysia dinner at a hotel here.

The event was attended by some 500 people, including diplomats, businessmen and senior civil servants.

The assembly, which ended on Nov 17, led to expressions of concern from many non-Malays as some of the speeches were peppered with religious fervour and touched on racial sensitivities.

Some quarters were unsettled by the tone of the speeches and accused the speakers of stoking tension which did not augur well for the country's multiracial and multireligious society.

Police reports have been lodged against some of the speakers, and police have started investigations under the Seditious Act.

Abdullah, who is Barisan Nasional chairman, said only a few speakers were deemed to have gone overboard.

"However, their views did not reflect Umno's stance," he said, adding that he took time to explain in his winding-up speech that the BN Government had always been fair to everyone, regardless of race and religion.

The prime minister said he was happy that despite the issues raised, the resolution adopted by the assembly remained the same.

"There was no pressure from anyone to amend the resolution to make it stronger. We maintained it as a moderate and practical resolution," he said to loud applause from the floor.

Earlier in his speech, Abdullah said the peaceful coexistence of various races in Malaysia, where no particular race had been marginalised, should be used as an example by other peace-loving nations.

The prime minister added that Malaysia had created a society based on inter-racial harmony, with a deliberate policy of affirmative action to improve the livelihood of millions.

He said the country's cultural and political DNA were now imbued with a deep sense of mutual co-operation and gain.

Abdullah expressed the hope that Malaysia would be used as an example by other peace-loving nations, especially the 500 million people living in Southeast Asia.

He said there should be continued efforts to reach further to help fellow Asian nations, combine the weight of Asia with that of Europe, in order to promote effective multilater-

alism.

Abdullah said Asean, unlike the United Nations, should create a regional machinery that was more efficient and, at the same time, just to all parties.

"We must, however, be careful not to allow the quest for greater political and civil rights to cause an imbalance in priorities and implementation of the regional agenda."

"We must also be aware of the complex repercussions for industrialised economies of our readiness to admit social and economic rights, especially at a time when environmental protection and sustainable development have risen to the top of the international economic agenda.

"However, combining the economic and social agenda with the political and civil is no longer a mere option — it is a necessity."

Abdullah said that as states moved or professed to move closer to the ideal of democracy, the conduct of international relations seemed to veer further away from it.

"This state of affairs is most amply illustrated by the ambivalence and consequent crisis of identity that is the UN of today.

"Having reached the sixth decade of its existence, the UN is floundering in an outmoded modus operandi.

"It is almost as if the world craves democracy and the multilateralism that this demands, and yet the UN recedes ever deeper into the dark recesses of undemocratic practices like permanent membership and veto powers offering themselves only to the big powers, among other things."

The UN must convene a special conference to address all the issues that had brought extreme stress to the state of relations between the Christian West and the Muslim world, he added.