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PM: Moderates must make their voices heard

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia cannot allow extremism to take root in the country and consequently undermine inter-racial harmony, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said on Tuesday.

Abdullah cautioned Malaysians against extremism, saying the country's different races needed to have a high degree of understanding and tolerance to prevent extremists from disrupting peace.

He said the key to peace, therefore, was the role played by those who believe in moderation.

"If the moderates do not speak up, they will allow the extremists to occupy centre stage. And then, extremism will be seen as the religious or national approach in our country," he said at a Christmas function organised by the

Christian Federation of Malaysia hosted by Kuala Lumpur Archbishop Datuk Murphy Pakiam.

Abdullah said he was happy to see people of different religions — Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians — at the Christmas event.

"This symbolises the friendship, degree of tolerance and the mutual respect (that we have for each other)," he added.

Abdullah noted the commonalities between Muslims and Christians, including their belief in many of the prophets.

"We have a lot in common. We are, after all, people of the Book," he said.

The prime minister said moderates must play a bigger role to prevent extremists from influencing public opinion by using sensitive race and religious issues.

"I'm really concerned when issues involving religion are brought up and the attendant

problems that all of us have to address because of that."

He said Malaysia would prosper only if the spirit of tolerance and friendship grew from strength to strength.

Malaysia, he said, had proven to be a land of opportunity for all races and faiths because its people knew how to respect one another and knew how to give and take.

"Everyone wants a peaceful and harmonious country to live in. This should be the ultimate goal of every Malaysian."

Abdullah said he was not blind to the fact that there were issues affecting race and religion which cropped up from time to time.

But such issues needed to be resolved "with a very high level of understanding, tolerance and respect".

"It is our responsibility that we address these issues diligently, so that our country will continue to remain peaceful."