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KUALA LUMPUR: Cooperation from every Asean country is needed to ensure the Malay language is the region's *lingua franca*, says Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob.

Ismail said the Malay language has its own uniqueness and advantages and he was confident that it could be made one of the official languages of Asean.

"At the Asean level, through forums such as the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia Language Council and the South-East Asian Literary Council, the consolidation of the roman system of spelling and terminology has been achieved.

"I hope the scope of cooperation is expanded, including research, publication and nurturing, and better planned so that the Malay language becomes the *lingua franca*," he said during the launch of the International Symposium on Bahasa Melayu at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) here yesterday.

Ismail Sabri clarified that it is not "Bahasa Malaysia" that Malaysia

Asean help sought to push Malay language

'Nations backing required for region's lingua franca'

wishes to promote as the Asean language, but "Bahasa Melayu" (the Malay language), which is also used in other countries in the bloc.

"(If) we use Bahasa Melayu as the primary (Asean language), it then has its variations - we have Bahasa Melayu Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu Brunei, Bahasa Melayu Singapore, and Bahasa Melayu Thailand.

"Some did not understand, they thought we wanted to elevate Bahasa Malaysia as the Asean language. Many of our friends from neighbouring countries criticised us, but perhaps this was because they misunderstood.

"Bahasa Melayu is the primary

language and then we have variations," he added.

He expressed confidence that obstacles in elevating the Malay language would be identified during the three-day symposium, adding that a framework on how the issues can be resolved would also be presented.

In upholding the language in the country, Ismail Sabri reiterated the government's commitment to amending the DBP Act to empower it to enforce proper language use.

"The Malay language is being left out of many things - street names, housing areas, and signboards. Many of them do not use the Malay

language even though it is one of the conditions," but DBP has no power to take action.

"The approving authority, which is the district council, may not have the authority or possibly enforcement has not been done. So, that is why we want to amend the Act so that DBP is empowered to take legal action," he said.

He also called on every sector - government, government-linked corporations and private entities - to uphold the Malay language.

A circular on the use of Malay in all affairs related to foreign countries including correspondence, had been issued in 2021, he added.

"All letters, including those I've sent to world leaders, were written in Malay. An English translation was attached as an appendix.

"During the Asean-US Special Summit with the US President (Joe Biden), I used Malay. The message I conveyed was clearly accepted by the President even though I spoke in Malay," he added.

Ismail Sabri said using Malay would not interfere with the development of a nation.

He gave examples of developed countries such as France and Japan which use their native language for all their correspondence.

"I hope we are not ashamed to use the Malay language - the language cannot be 'dignified' if we ourselves are not confident," he said.

About 60 papers that highlight efforts to "dignify" the Malay language in various sectors would be presented in the symposium, which also included experts from other countries.