

**Spend Christmas To Understand Fellow Malaysians Better, Says Najib
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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 24 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has called on Malaysians to spend this Christmas to understand fellow Malaysians better, and appreciate them for the diversity and strength they have contributed to the country.

"What I like about this time of the year is that Christmas helps to remind people to spread goodwill and cheer, just in time to usher in the New Year and make a fresh start. We could all use a little reminder every now and then," he said.

In his Christmas message posted on his www.1Malaysia.com.my blog, Najib said he always believed that as a nation of moderates, "we must seize every opportunity to forge better understanding between Malaysians of different cultures and faith".

The prime minister said he underscored this belief when he led government delegates to pay a courtesy call on Pope Benedict XVI at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo in July, where he shared his vision of the Global Movement of the Moderates.

"From that working visit, Malaysia and the Holy See (Vatican City) have agreed to establish diplomatic relations, which I hope will lead to closer links and inter-faith dialogue between us," he said.

Likewise, at home, Najib said he was equally committed to further strengthening the interaction that had long existed with the Christian community.

"I've always made a special effort to meet with people of all faiths. I look forward to continuing this practice to seek your ideas and hear your thoughts for the betterment of our society," he said.

The prime minister noted that in Malaysia, celebrations that were specific to cultural and religious communities had become increasingly accepted and celebrated by the larger Malaysian population, such as the gift-giving custom commonly practiced during Christmas.

"It's fascinating to observe how the nation's multi-cultural as well as multi-religious practices blend into the society," he said as he wished all Malaysians of the Christian faith a Merry Christmas.

Christmas is celebrated worldwide Sunday.

Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin urged the people to continue adopting a moderate attitude in pursuing their religious beliefs and practices.

He said building a nation of many races and beliefs was not easy but Malaysia had succeeded in doing so because the keys lie in mutual respect and accepting one another.

"I believe that moderation in religious beliefs and practices is the bulwark in maintaining good relations between races while curbing religious extremists," he said.

"Harmony between races and religions in this country is a very precious gift from God so much so that it is envied by many quarters because out there, they had failed to emulate us.

"Hence, it is the responsibility of the people to continue to maintain harmony among races and religions as it has been the backbone of the country," he said, adding that efforts to foster harmony should not be left to the government alone.

Muhyiddin said the people regardless of races and religions in the country shared a common future and destiny. Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin urged the people to continue adopting a moderate attitude in pursuing their religious beliefs and practices.

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Meanwhile, Gerakan president Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, in his message, said he believed that festive seasons such as Christmas would continue to serve as an opportunity to encourage all moderate Malaysians from all religious beliefs and all walks of life, to stand together to jointly combat extremism and other social ills.

Dr Koh, who is also Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, said the past few years had been very challenging with differences and disputes plaguing many societies, and Malaysia had its own share of challenges, given its diversity and complexity.

"All of us, leaders in the clergy and civil society, public and private sectors, must continue our constructive engagement to achieve deeper understanding and to operationalise our commitment to inclusiveness, moderation and compassion in discharging our various responsibilities in our everyday life," he said.

Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Abdul Khalid Ibrahim said the Christmas celebration clearly showed multi-racial and multi-religious harmony was a reality in the country.

"In our efforts to make Malaysia a developed country, racial and religious diversity must be seen as a strength and not a liability," he said.

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