

Recognise Rohingya as citizens, Dr M tells Myanmar

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FINDING RESOLUTION: Conference seeks solutions rather than to apportion blame, says Global Peace Foundation president

KUALA LUMPUR: THE violence and conflict surrounding the Rohingya community can only be resolved when the Myanmar government recognises the group as citizens, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

The former prime minister said yesterday the country's inability to accept the Rohingya as an indigenous group had led to years of discrimination, oppression and sectarian clashes, most recently seen in this year's ongoing riots between the predominantly Muslim ethnic minority and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists.

"When one group is denied their rights, there will be clashes, there will be oppression.

"It is very unfortunate that people should be killed and houses burnt, simply because the Myanmar government refuses to recognise its own citizens," he said in his keynote address at the "Plight of the Rohingya: Solution?" international conference held at the Islamic Arts Museum yesterday.

Organised by the Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF), of which Dr Mahathir is president, the conference was held to discuss and formulate solutions to the conflict and problems surrounding the Rohingya community, which include persecution, statelessness, violence and mass displacement.

Dr Mahathir said the conference was held not to place blame or judgment on any party, but to find solutions to the conflict.

He said such clashes over ethnic differences and citizenship were similar to Malaysia's experience at the end of the British colonial era, when there was little clarity over the status of Indian and Chinese immigrants, in the country then known as Tanah Melayu.

"We had the same problems as Myanmar upon independence. Initially, many of the Chinese and Indian immigrants who had been brought over by the British returned to their homeland, especially after the 1929 recession.

"However, there were many others who had chosen to stay here, to live here, to regard Malaysia as their home.

"So, when we were struggling for independence, the indigenous people, the Malays, decided that they should accept the Chinese and Indians as citizens of a larger, united state."

He said the Malays had accepted others despite the fact that most of the new citizens had settled in the country for only three generations or less.

In contrast, he said, Myanmar has refused to recognise Rohingya despite the fact that they had settled in the Arakan region since the 8th century.

"If other countries can accept foreigners as citizens, we cannot see why Myanmar should have a policy that excludes a group that has been in the country for more than a thousand years."

He said Myanmar's laws had in turn created problems for other countries, such as Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia, where many Rohingya had been forced to take refuge.

"Myanmar has shown its willingness to be part of a world community, as seen through its membership and involvement in Asean. It has shown that it is ready to transform itself from an authoritarian state to a democracy, where the people have to right to choose their own leaders.

"So it would be a shame and a gross injustice if large segments of its population are denied this right."

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