

**Put Aside Differences For Country's Continued Progress - Najib
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 5 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak Wednesday night invited Malaysians to make a commitment together to continued development of the country by putting aside differences and looking instead at what they share.

The prime minister urged the people to work together with mutual respect and responsibility, focusing on their common destiny.

"As we look beyond developed-nation status, we must focus our energies on building a sustainable source of talent, those who will carry forward the momentum that began five decades ago in Merdeka Square," he said.

Najib said this in his speech which carried the theme, 'Contribution to the Nation' at the 2013 Merdeka Awards presentation to five recipients, here.

Tan Sri Arsyad Ayub and Raja Tan Sri Muhammad Alias were joint recipients under the Education and Community category, Dr Lim Boo Liat (Environment), Tan Sri Dr Yahya Awang (Science and Technology) and Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Lam Sai Kit (Outstanding Scholastic Achievement).

Najib presented the awards in the presence of the Regent of Perak, Raja Dr Nazrin Shah, who is also the chairman of the Merdeka Award board of trustees.

The prime minister noted that since independence, sustained rapid economic growth had raised Malaysia from an agricultural and commodity-based economy to become one of the world's top trading nations.

"Our sound economic performance has helped improve the quality of life for Malaysians, supporting huge advances in education, healthcare, infrastructure, housing and public amenities," he said.

Najib stressed that the country's hopes and prospects rested on the new generation of young Malaysians who would steer the nation to greater heights.

On the 2013 Merdeka Award recipients, he said they boasted a combined legacy that had benefited generations of Malaysians, past and present.

"Their achievements - in education, rural reform, conservation, healthcare and medical research - have made a significant contribution to the nation's story," Najib said.

Najib pointed out that when his father, the country's second prime minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein wanted to turn Mara College into an institution focusing on developing the talents the country needed, he entrusted Arshad with the task.

"Tan Sri Arshad has shaped Malaysia's education landscape, developing professional education, and pursuing education reforms and innovation that have opened up a world of opportunities to students in Malaysia," he said.

Najib said the country had also relied on experts like Raja Alias who not only helped develop the palm oil commodity but also made a difference to the lives of numerous rural communities.

He paid glowing tributes to the other recipients as well.

"These five gentlemen, and the teams who worked alongside them, have left their mark on Malaysia's history. They have also laid the foundations for future success," he said.

Since its founding in 2007, the Merdeka Award has recognised 22 exceptional individuals and two organisations, each serving as role models and for the post-Merdeka generation to emulate.

Also present were Raja Puan Besar of Perak Tuanku Zara Salim, the prime minister's wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, Petronas chairman Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan and Shell Malaysia chairman Lo.

Meanwhile, Raja Nazrin said the Merdeka Award had always been about reaching "the highest of heights".

He said the award drew as inspiration the efforts of the nation's founding fathers, who came together to unite under one flag and set the nation's growth and success as their aim.

"These are the values that anchor the 'Spirit of Merdeka' and which we, at the Merdeka Award, have made the mission to cultivate and nurture among the people of Malaysia," he said in his speech at the event.

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