

Abdullah: National unity still a paramount objective

NST - 20/4/2004, m/s: 2.

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — His greatest challenge as Prime Minister is to make Malaysians think of themselves as one, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today.

“National unity became the paramount objective when we achieved Independence and it is still the paramount objective,” Abdullah told an audience of some 400 at the inaugural Asia Media Summit here.

He said the young must be made to realise the importance of racial unity.

“We have to make them forget their skin colour, their religion or their culture, and look beyond that to see all Malaysians as friends.”

He said it was important that the Government continue to pursue national unity, as it had for the past 50 years.

Such policies had not failed, he said, but the Government needed to do more in this regard as the policy would not bear fruit in the next three to four years, and perhaps “not even in one generation”.

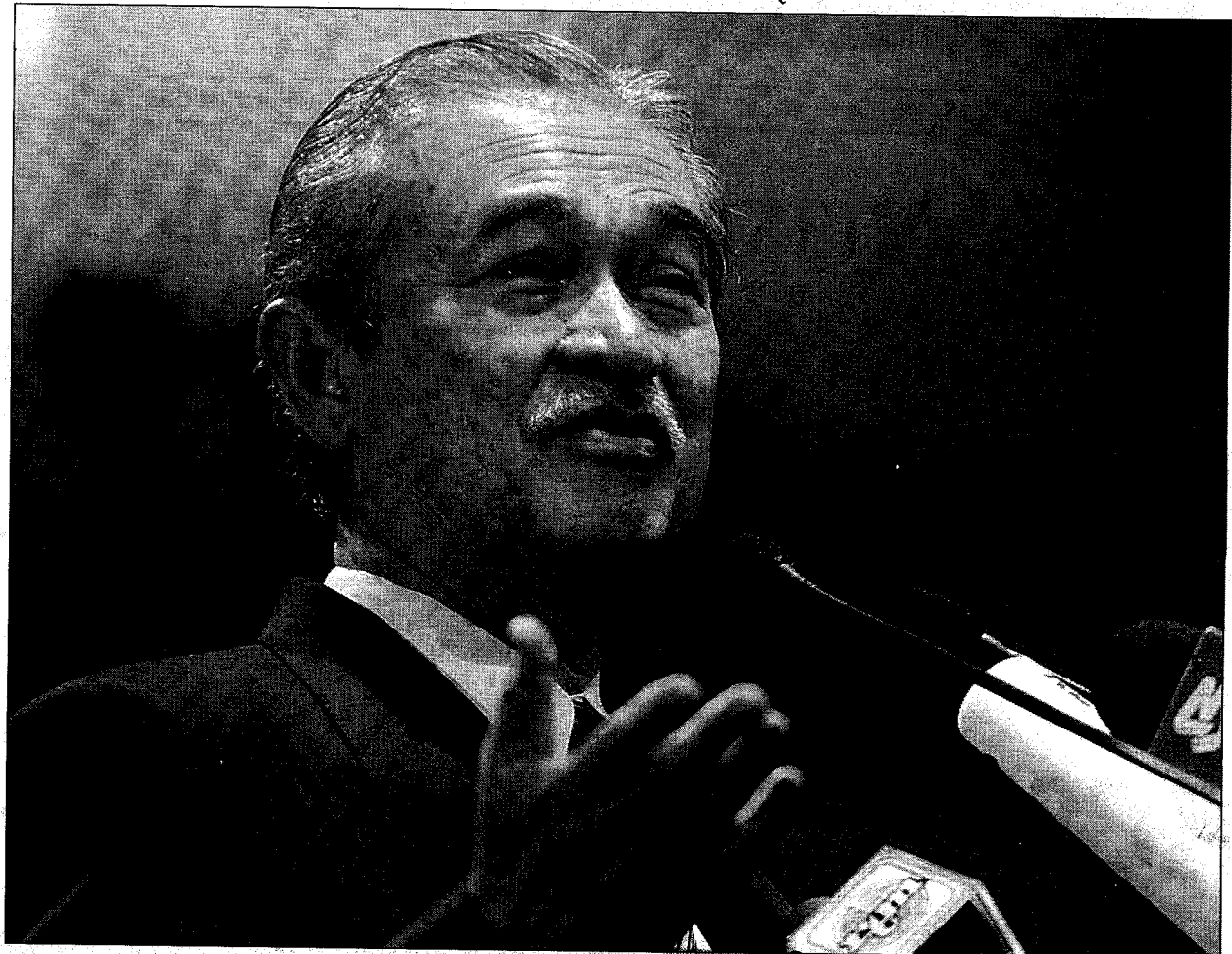
Abdullah said that when he was a child, he heard snide remarks from the Malays about what the Chinese and Indian immigrants were doing in this country. But as time went by, the people of this country began to accept that the multi-racial nature of the country was here to stay.

Today's summit was jointly organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), News World Asia (NWA), and the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcast Development (AIBD) as a prelude to a global media summit in May next year.

Some 400 media professionals from 54 countries, representing 186 media organisations, participated in the programme. The *New Straits Times* is one of the sponsors.

The Prime Minister's keynote speech addressed “The Challenges of Multi-religious, Multi-ethnic and Multi-cultural Societies”.

Abdullah also spent about 30 minutes in a question-and-answer session with participants, who sought his thoughts on issues ranging from globalisation and the Western me-



MAKING A POINT: Abdullah delivering the keynote address at the inaugural Asia Media Summit. — Bernama picture

dia's coverage of the war in Iraq to the conflict in the Middle East.

On the media's negative portrayal of Islam as a religion of terrorists, Abdullah said Islam did not promote terrorism but some had hijacked the religion and terrorised innocents in the name of Islam.

“Some even say Prophet Muhammad was a terrorist, which is entirely wrong. The media tends to report bad things rather than good things because it is sensational. That is why people see and read more about what the terrorists are doing.

“I hope that the media can give more constructive and productive space to religion and to show how people from various faiths can live in

peace and harmony.”

On the assassination of top Hamas leader Abdel-Aziz al-Rantisi, Abdullah said the Palestinian issue was not religion but about the plight of Palestinians who want to return to their homeland.

He said Malaysians in general supported the Government's stand on the Palestinian issue regardless of racial and religious backgrounds.

In his opening speech, Abdullah said a social contract was important in multi-cultural societies and Malaysia was one example where such a contract had ensured peace and stability for almost 50 years.

He said the nation's founding fathers' first task was to build a con-

sensus among the different communities.

“Perhaps the most significant aspect of the contract was the agreement by the indigenous people to grant citizenship to the immigrant Chinese and Indians. Chinese and Indians now sit in the federal Cabinet and state executive councils.

“In return, the immigrant communities agreed to special economic privileges for the indigenous people given their disadvantaged position.”

Abdullah said the country's social contract would fail if not supported by a growing economy, and three decades of economic expansion had helped avert hostility and confrontation among different communities.