

PM explains merger quest

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KUALA LUMPUR: The New Straits Times-Utusan Melayu merger is designed to consolidate the strengths of both newspapers to ensure that the oldest Malay and English newspapers survive and not close shop, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

He said the merger was aimed at combining resources to make the two a strong entity.

"I cannot understand why many people think this merger is a move to curtail press freedom," he told reporters after launching the Innovative Showcase exhibition, National Innovative Awards and the Brain Gain portal here yesterday.

"The merger is between two news-

papers and there is nothing sinister about it.

"But to ensure the survival of both entities, there has to be consolidation to benefit both parties in the long term."

On whether Utusan Melayu group chief editor Datuk Khalid Mohamad had sent him a letter of protest over the merger, the Prime Minister said: "No, I did not receive any letter. If there

was one, I have not read its contents."

He gave an assurance that both newspapers would retain their respective identities.

"In the interest of both parties, it is good that the editorial section and other departments linked to it maintain the present course," he said.

"This merger is needed to pool resources and make for a strong and resilient combination to face

future challenges.

"This is the objective of the merger."

To an unrelated question, Abdullah, who is also the Internal Security Minister, said all states should come out with a *fatwa* (edict) to ban the Al-Arqam movement.

He said the Malaysian Islamic Development Department was doing its best to ensure the movement was not revived.