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WEEKLY SPECIAL

Monday 

DAILY EXPRESS NEWS

Pledge not to remove Crosses is hailed

05 December, 2007

Kota Kinabalu: The Sabah Council of Churches (SCC) Tuesday welcomed the Education Ministry's firm assurance that crucifixes placed in Christian Mission schools - which have been part and parcel of the identity of such schools since time immemorial - will not be removed.

Its Chairman Datuk Bishop Voo Thien Fui said Tuesday, the Council was very happy with the decision to preserve the tradition and thanked the Government for understanding the sensitivities of Christian mission schools.

"I take this opportunity to call on school management boards concerned to run their schools as best as they can in line with the national education policy.

"We hope Mission schools will continue to live up to their good name in meeting the high expectations of society, the State and nation," he said, when contacted.

He noted that many of the country's leaders in the public sphere, including those who have retired, were the products of mission schools.

On Monday, Deputy Education Minister Datuk Noh Omar said it was a tradition for mission schools to have crosses erected in school compounds and there was no reason to remove them.

"We will continue with the current practice, which is a tradition started a long time ago," he had told opposition DAP leader Lim Kit Siang in Parliament.

Lim had demanded an answer from Noh, saying that two Barisan Nasional MPs had called for church influence in schools to be curbed. The remarks were made by Syed Hood Syed Edros (BN-Parit Sulong) and Datuk Mohamed Aziz (BN-Sri Gading).

Syed Hood had said he was disappointed that the statue of the Virgin Mary was displayed in front of convent schools and questioned why the Education Ministry allowed it as Malaysia is an Islamic nation.

Mohamed interjected in support of Syed Hood, saying a Muslim father complained that these schools remained open when Hari Raya Aidilfitri was

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celebrated.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Mohd Nazri cautioned MPs that they were not above the Sedition Act and could not make seditious statements in Parliament. Both Syed Hood and Mohd Aziz were not present in Parliament when Lim asked Nor about the issue.

"There is growing intolerance and increasing extremism in Malaysia which are inimical to successful nation building," Lim said in a statement, later.

"The latest instance is the demand for the removal of the Christian cross and the demolition of Christian statues in mission schools," he added.

Lim said the comments - including suggestions that Muslim children at the schools were being made apostates, or abandoning the faith - had been widely circulated on the Internet.

"I asked Noh Omar... why the Ministry was condoning such extremism by its silence when such statements should be denounced without equivocation," he said.

Lim noted that many great Muslim Malay leaders had studied at mission schools, including Deputy PM Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and the Sultan of Selangor.

Former Principal of SM La Salle, Datuk Brother Charles O'Leary expressed happiness that the statement by the two MPs had been corrected by the highest authorities, and that action would be taken to dispel the anxieties and criticisms of the Christian communities throughout the nation.

Bro. Charles said having crosses in Christian missionary schools is a long tradition going back to a couple of hundred years. "Moreover, since Malaysia's independence, Christian schools have played an important part in the development of the country and in the promotion of education.

"We opened our doors to Muslim students and there was never any attempt at making Muslim students Christians."

Bro. Charles also recalled a statement by former PM Tun Dr Mahathir saying that his father attended school in St Xavier's Penang and studied even the Holy Scriptures.

"According to Dr Mahathir, there was never any attempt to make his father a Christian. In fact, he said his father became a better Muslim."

He added: "I think our schools always have that motivationÉthat we want to make everybody better followers of whatever religion they follow - Christians better Christians, Muslims better Muslims, Hindus better Hindus, Buddhists better Buddhists and so on.

"We don't believe in converting them."

Principal of SM Konven St Francis, Pang Shat Muai expressed relief, saying of the student population of 843 in 23 classes (Form One to Form Five), about 300 are Muslims.

"Muslim parents don't mind sending their children to the school because of its reputation as one of the leading education institutions in the State. Not only that, we have produced some fine women leaders, State athletes and professionals since this girls' school was rebuilt after the Second World War."

St Francis Convent School started as a primary school in 1923.

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