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PRESS STATEMENT FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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We are outraged by the tragic attacks on our Christian brothers and sisters and reiterate our unequivocal condemnation of the bombing of churches in Malaysia. Today's attack on the oldest standing church in Malaysia, the All Saints Church in Taiping, is an attack on our nation's heritage.

As a nation we struggle to uphold the spirit of unity that our founding fathers envisioned at independence. We must hold fast to Article 11 of the Federal Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion and the right of religious groups to manage their own affairs. In such times the spirit of engagement and dialogue must transcend those voices that would seek to sow discord and enmity across our land.

The people of Malaysia must unite against those who exploit race and religion to incite hatred for political gain. We must renew our commitment to religious understanding and religious freedom.

This is a time that tests the resolve of all religions for peace and mutual respect. We must remember that the God who we worship is in fact the same God, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.

With respect to the use of the word Allah, for example, it cannot be disputed that Arabic speaking Muslims, Christians and Jews have collectively prayed to God as Allah throughout the last fourteen centuries. While sensitivities over its usage have arisen in Malaysia, the way to resolve these conflicts is not by burning churches and staging incendiary protests but by reasoned engagement and interreligious dialogue.

Muslims must recall the memory of our own tradition's remarkable commitment to understanding and coexistence with the People of the Book. Islam clearly grants respect to Christians and Jews. In the Quran's second chapter, God says:

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God (Aal-Imran, 3:64)

And in the 29th Chapter He says:

And dispute not with the People of the Book but say "We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and that which came down to you...our God [Allah] and your God [Allah] is One, and it is to Him we bow (al-Ankabut, 29:46)

Jesus is himself revered as one of the greatest prophets whose noble example should be followed. The Caliph Umar, who visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 638 AD, was careful to ensure that the Muslims respect the sanctity of Christian places of worship. What then of our own Police's hesitation to offer an assurance of safety and security for Malaysian churches?

Much of the blame for the recent attacks can be placed at the doorstep of the UMNO-led BN ruling party. Its incessant racist propaganda over the Allah issue and the inflammatory rhetoric issued by government controlled mainstream media especially, Utusan Malaysia, are

reprehensible. Such wanton acts of provocation are indeed criminal and demonstrate the duplicity of the 1Malaysia campaign.

I am encouraged by the swift condemnation of the attacks issued by Muslim organizations and leaders. I likewise applaud our Christian leaders for their strong statements calling for calm and forgiveness and resisting revenge and retaliation.

The need for interfaith dialogue in Malaysia is an idea whose time is long overdue. We must now advance the spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood which is inherent in our religions and enshrined in our Constitution. Pakatan Rakyat will collectively take steps to ensure that the necessary dialogue and discussion take place throughout the country. Our fellow Christians must feel safe and secure in this country knowing that their freedom to worship is protected.

ANWAR IBRAHIM

Opposition Leader