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Hopping for the birth of Muslim media network

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THE role of the media was inevitably raised during the international symposium on the "Islamic World and Global Co-operation: Preparing for the 21st Century" in Kuala Lumpur last week.

Posed, among others, was the question: Why is it that when the Western media reports about "Muslim terrorists" the national or local media simply repeats them? And yet there is no reference to "Christian terrorists" on violent actions by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Philadelphia bombing by xenophobic American militias and atrocities perpetrated by the Serbs in Bosnia.

Suggested then was the establishment of an alternative media network in the Muslim world to combat such examples of biased reporting. It should then disseminate Muslim news and views throughout the non-Muslim world also.

It will take some doing and surely needed is political will. For media practitioners there is a reminder from one failed venture that rhetorics alone will not suffice. Indeed there are lessons also for politicians and Government.

Formed in the early 70s was the International Islamic News Agency (IINA) with its headquarters in Jeddah since Saudi Arabia provided funding. There were contributions from other Arab countries, too, and linked to it as a subscriber also was Bernama, Malaysia's national news agency.

Meant to disseminate news about happenings and development in Muslim countries, IINA was fired by enthusiasm in the beginning. But then came the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran and the agency found itself in a quandary as to how it should report the on-going battles between the two Muslim countries.

For a period of time Bernama did not receive any news about the war. And so in the end the agency meant to spread news and views about Muslim countries withered. The failure was compounded by non-payment of dues by certain Muslim countries.

The Islamic symposium has now provided new impetus for the establishment of a Muslim media network. But in the wake of so many innovations in information technology including the Internet, much, therefore, needs to be done. Surely wished by media practitioners is that the failure of IINA will not be repeated for lack of sustained political will, or to put it crudely, because there's no fire in the belly.

One of the positive aspects of the symposium organised by the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (Ikim) was its practical approach. Discussions fell into four general sections - a Muslim critical self-examination, area of differences between the Muslim and non-Muslim world, area of similarity between the two realms and, finally, a plan of action.

As Professor Chandra Mudzaffar, director of Just World Trust, put it succinctly then, "We are here not to just berate others."

Thus noted by speakers in the process of self-criticism were the following:

- \* The nationalist divisions of the Muslim ummah and the alienation of the Muslim masses from elites both political and religious, and the feeling of powerlessness among them.

- \* The use of violence by Muslims against Muslims to impose a particular policy as in Afghanistan and Algeria.

\* The role of women who have generally not been sufficiently valued for their contributions to economic and social progress.

In Afghanistan, for example, women are forbidden to work and girls not encouraged to go to school. In several Muslim countries women do not have the right to vote much less stand as candidates. In Algeria, Muslim fanatics have no compunction in beheading women not supportive of their cause.

A reminder came later from one participant that Western perception of the Muslim world is also based on how the Muslim women are treated. The comment came following a gentle reminder from former Deputy Minister Sharifah Dorah that out of 134 participants only eight were women.

In an earlier dialogue session Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was asked about the status of Muslim women. His reply: To deny women their contribution would be to cut in half the strength and potentials of the Muslim world. It would mean that out of 1.2 billion Muslims throughout the globe, only half its strength - 600 million - could be mobilised. And in Malaysia with 53 per cent Muslim population, its strength would be cut to just 26.5 per cent.

This scribe once had the occasion to ask a young non-Muslim woman writer how she saw the 21st century for Malaysian women. Her reply, "My worry is that we non-Muslim women will, out of peer pressure, be forced to wear the hijab too."

In the group discussion on political dimensions, there was criticism about the tendency to view the non-Muslim world, especially the West, as monolithic much as Westerners see Islam as an undifferentiated whole.

Speakers in the religious/cultural group described such thinking in terms of a sharp division as anachronistic. Quote: "Intensified migration from Muslim-majority countries to the Western hemisphere, Europe and Australia as well as conversions to Islam in Europe, Canada and the US means that Islam has ceased to be a religion with geographical frontiers ... recent estimates indicate that by the year 2002 Muslims will constitute the second largest religious group in the US after Christians. In some European countries, such as France, some five per cent of the population are Muslims."

Mentioned also is something not generally known about - 300,000 Muslims who have moved to Sweden.

Emphasised by speakers in the same group was a need in the Muslim world for "initiatives to improve the standard of teaching about religions other than Islam".

Pointed out was that if Muslims rightly insist that those who write about their history, religion and traditions should know the Islamic languages "it is reasonable to ask that those who teach about Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism also know the relevant languages, at least those involved in university and postgraduate work".

The suggestion came under the heading of the need to "educate the educators".

The group discussion on economic dimensions of forging co-operation laid stress on the varied and multilayered changes facing Muslim countries.

On the national level was the imperative to reform their political systems to ensure a stable policy framework that would guarantee continuity.

Noted was that a number of Muslim countries have achieved a moderate level of economic, social and political development and as such, could act as "guidance and reference for other countries. They also have the potential to develop some leverage in the global economic equilibrium and negotiate for the protection and growth of the interests of the Muslim ummah".

Taken heed of were new conditions and constraints dictated by international organisations such as WTO rules, IMF conditionalities of structure adjustment and institutional reforms. These, too, pose challenges to Muslim countries.

As expected, the issue of Palestine was raised and the West was accused of disregarding Muslim claims and sensibilities. There was also the issue of Bosnia. While Britain supported the Serbs, as Chandra pointed out, the West took care to exclude both Turkey and Iran in the matter. He expressed regret, too, that the principles of accountability and consultations have been ignored in some Muslim countries.

Mustapha Ali, Pas treasurer, spoke on Islam misunderstood "not just by non-Muslims but also Muslims themselves". Mentioned were the differences between the Egyptian Government and the Muslim Brotherhood, conflicting views in Saudi Arabia and in Turkey "between the Government and the generals supposedly under the Government".

At another level another speaker called on Muslim countries to secure a seat in the UN Security Council, and to seek the abolition of the veto power which had often been abused in the past.

Areas of similarity with the non-Muslim world drew animated discussions. Quote: "The common trans-civilisational concern to advance social and economic development and overcome entrenched injustices was recognised ... religious scholars in almost all civilisations have expressed parallel concern at the developments of cloning techniques".

After so much talk we now wait for some action. Will we now see the birth of the alternative Muslim media network ? Before the beginning of the new century, please.

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