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Giving Muslim minorities in Europe their place

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The challenge faced by European society today is in defining the extent Muslim minorities should be allowed to live a Muslim lifestyle in a secular society.

German Oriental Institute director Professor Dr Udo Steinbach said this was an absolutely new phenomenon in Germany as its Muslim population had risen to three million in the last 30 years.

"The sort of liberal, pluralistic Islam which permits the various groups to live together in Malaysia is the sort of societal model that we should study."

Steinbach was speaking at the Malaysian-European Union Joint Seminar: "Europe and the Islamic World" organised by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia and Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (Ocis), supported by the European Union.

It was opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday. The New Straits Times is the official newspaper.

A scholar on Islam in the Middle East, Steinbach is the author of Contemporary Islam, which is written in German and has been translated into Italian.

He said the book discusses the position of Islam in various Islamic countries, including Malaysia.

"It would be good to make clear to the European public and their politicians that Malaysia is a peculiar country."

Among these "peculiarities", Steinbach said, was an approach to Islam that encompasses democracy, a certain amount of secularity and a liberal system in that it allows other religions to exist within the same society.

"I think this is really a peculiar feature of Malaysia that on one hand you try to bring back Islam into society and at the same time you do not marginalise the others."

He said the perception among Westerners that Islam was an exclusive and even intolerant religion seemed, to a certain extent, to be confirmed by developments in Iran, Afghanistan and Egypt.

"Normally, when Westerners see Islam, they see the Middle East. It is important to look beyond and take a look at what is going on in this part of the world."

Ambassador Ingmar Karlsson from the Swedish Embassy in Prague, said racism and intolerance were gaining strength throughout Europe in reaction to the large number of immigrants.

"These problems are already so serious that they can only be solved by joint European endeavours and a consistent European immigration and refugee policy."

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