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Norhata's uphill task to foster harmony and unity

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Bai Putri Norhata M. Alonto, the first Muslim to be appointed presidential adviser for Muslim Affairs in the office of the Philippine President, is amazed at how Malaysia has managed to unite its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious people.

"In the Philippines, we are largely one ethnic group and there are two religions.

"Yet we cannot get along and there's a war still being waged," she said.

Norhata said although there had been efforts to foster inter-religious understanding between Filipino Muslims and Christians for the past 30 years, "it is leading us to nowhere".

"I tell the people that if there is no peace, there will be no prosperity.

"Peace and unity have to be built on understanding from knowing each other.

"It's a woman's dream that peace and unity will eventually prevail," she said, her voice filled with hope for a country with eight million Muslims out of a 70 million population.

"I mention woman because no matter what their position in life, men will always return to the women, whether it's their mother, wife ..." she said, drawing stifled chuckles from the largely male audience at an Islamic seminar here.

Norhata, 48, was speaking at a two-day seminar on "The Role of Islamic Civilisation in Fostering Inter-Religious Understanding" which ends today.

It was organised by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia.

This mother of five and grandmother to seven, was a professor of psychology at the Mindanao State University.

She later turned to business before being appointed to her new post.

She took the oath of office last April 6.

She feels it is an honour as it was the first time that a Philippine President had appointed a Muslim into his immediate circle.

Her role is to bring President Joseph Estrada closer to the Muslim community and concerns, as well as to help him address Muslim concerns within the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

Norhata is also to co-ordinate and co-operate with government agencies and non-governmental organisations in addressing Muslim issues and problems.

"It's a challenging job but broad.

"There are no limitations or parameters.

"It's so general that anything goes," she elaborated.

Poverty prevails and there is lack of education in the Muslim areas although these are rich in natural resources and the people have the potential to progress.

"We have lagged behind due to past governmental neglect in providing infrastructure and educational facilities and opportunities, and also because of the insurgencies.

"There is thus an urgent need to develop our economy and our people in the fields of education, trade and industry," said Norhata.

There are some 24 poor provinces within the archipelago with 16 in Mindanao, out of which about half are Muslims.

Norhata, however, disclosed that while poverty was decreasing in other areas due to the government's efforts, it was worsening in the Muslim

areas.

"But you cannot blame the current situation on the present government, but on the lack of governance and leadership in the Muslim Autonomous Region of Lanao del Sur, Sulu, Tawi Tawi and Maguindanao.

"But as far as religion is concerned, we are allowed to practise Islam with considerable amount of freedom."

Norhata is married to Datu Abul Khayr Alonto, co-founder of the Moro National Liberation Front together with Nur Misuari, now Muslim Mindanao Governor.

Alonto, who was the first interim head of the Muslim Autonomous Government and speaker of the Regional Assembly, later became Ambassador to Nigeria.

After that, he went into business and his latest achievement was to bring in an oil palm joint venture project with Malaysia's Tabung Haji to Mindanao.

"Without (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad)'s support, the project would not have materialised," said Norhata who personally thanked the Prime Minister during tea after the opening of the seminar yesterday.

She said 800 of the 5,500 hectares of land allocated had been planted with oil palm since the project was implemented in 1997, providing jobs for hundreds of Muslims.

"It is a manifestation of Dr Mahathir's desire to help our economy, which will eventually change our status in life for the better."

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