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Much to be learnt from success of Tabung Haji

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FORGET Isna (Islamic Society of North America). Just visit the Palace of the Golden Horses in Sri Kembangan and you'll see why. If Isna had withdrawn its earlier invitation to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to deliver his perspective on Islam in Chicago earlier this month, Saudi Arabia did quite the opposite.

The Prime Minister was sharing his views on Islam with people who matter - haj organisers from more than 50 Islamic countries.

Performing the haj (for those who can afford it, and "afford" here is defined in its widest sense) is one of the five tenets of Islam, and Malaysia, it appears, is seen as the world's most capable manager in this area.

The Saudi Government, acknowledging Malaysia's repeated success in handling Muslims who perform the haj, had asked Tabung Haji to help organise the first-ever international conference so that others could learn a thing or two.

"There is plenty to be learned of the Malaysian experience by other Islamic countries. Others can adapt and see which aspect of their organisation is suitable for their own experience," said Saudi Arabia's Minister of Haj, Dr Iyad Ameen Madani a few days ago.

He should know. After all, Mecca hosts more than two million Muslims every year during the haj season, and this is by no means an easy assignment. A total of 51 nations at the three-day conference will be able to voice opinions on what is essential to a pilgrim.

Among the Haj Ministers attending are those from India, Iran, Algeria, Syria, Oman, Yemen, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Mali, Jordan, Senegal, Bahrain, China, Ghana and Kosovo.

Tabung Haji, set up in November 1962, is helping out with the logistics and provides the technical support for its success.

Royal Prof Ungku Aziz, the man responsible for the establishment of what was then known as the Pilgrimage and Fund Board, must be very happy that his idea has won international acclaim and acceptance. Ungku Aziz, now 78, is a former Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya.

The Saudi Haj Minister said in an interview earlier this week: "The gathering of Haj Ministers here is not meant to promote Saudi Arabia's efforts in dealing with some two million pilgrims to Mecca each year but to exchange ideas on how to overcome obstacles towards a smoother performance of the haj."

It is understood that the Malaysian experience in organising the pilgrimage annually has prompted the Saudi Government to work with Tabung Haji. Every year, Malaysian pilgrims are sufficiently coached in haj routines, provided with excellent logistical support to and fro, and well cared for when in the holy land.

No other country provides such a comprehensive programme for their citizens when performing the haj.

More than providing a service, Tabung Haji, by and large, has gone about discharging its duties to the pilgrims in a manner that is now about to be emulated by others.

Perhaps, others who are considering setting up their own foundation or board for a similar purpose should pay some attention to Ungku Aziz's comments. He said the role of Tabung Haji is not merely of a trust fund responsible for handling pilgrimage matters but also as a catalyst and

incentive for Muslims to save.

The Fund now has 3.7 million depositors with savings totalling RM80 billion. Indeed, pilgrims from Malaysia can now perform their haj with much more confidence and comfort than their counterparts elsewhere. Isna may not acknowledge Malaysia's success in this area, and would perhaps rather champion personal causes.

As for Tabung Haji, helping to organise the first-ever haj conference should not encourage it to rest on its laurels. There are shortcomings that need to be addressed, and the faster this is done the better.

It should attempt to meet as many depositors as possible, and perhaps conduct a survey to find out what kind of improvement needs to be introduced.

Malaysia should be proud to have been picked to organise the conference and share its experiences and expertise.

It may not be able to win everyone over with its numerous successful Islamic ventures and initiatives, but being recognised as a competent haj organiser is most satisfying indeed.

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