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Muslims can live with the West

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The United States and its allies, including the Western media, must learn to distinguish between progressive Islam and the narrow militant political form of the religion.

Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim) director-general Datuk Dr Ismail Ibrahim said there was a need to display more sensitivity in distinguishing between Islam and terrorism.

He said Muslims and the West could live together in peaceful and productive co-existence.

Violence against civilians violated the teachings of the religion, he said, arguing that response against terrorism need not only be military but also attack its root causes.

"The media must be able to distinguish another picture of Islam - a true and progressive image of the religion from countries which had practised the true teachings of Islam," he said in his paper titled "The disinformation of Islam: The shaping of the dark images of Islam and Muslims in the media".

The paper was presented at an international seminar and dialogue themed "Enhancing the understanding of Islam and the media" organised by Ikim. It was opened yesterday by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Ismail said countries practising the true teachings of Islam shared many common traits with the West. Among these were practising the universal value of peaceful and productive co-existence among the different races; fighting against any form of discriminations, aggression and injustice internally or internationally; subscribing to the rule of law, human rights and democracy; subscribing to sustainable development; and championing the world system of free trade.

Ismail said that disinformation about Islam by the Western media had been continuous.

The US and its allies needed to show political will stop this. They were mistakenly trying to replace communism with Islamism as a parallel ideology and sequential enemy.

"Besides political will, we also need a more caring, responsible and enlightened media in the West. We also need Muslims to come to terms and reach solutions on the fundamental issue of how they should interact with the West."

As for the Muslims, Ismail felt they had to play their role.

They must instil confidence among themselves that it was not a sin to work together with the West on matters of common interest, strategic importance and mutual benefit.

"They must facilitate and provide mechanisms to debunk the thesis of 'political Islam' which promotes conflict and antagonism between civilisations and groups of peoples of different beliefs."

Ismail said Muslims must also come to terms with the challenges of practical modern life and at the same time remain good Muslims.

"They have to engage constructively with other civilisations with dignity and purpose."

Ismail said ties between the Western and Islamic countries did not revolve only on economic and geopolitical issues.

He said thousands of scientists and experts from Muslim countries were working in various fields in the Silicon Valley, Nasa, famous medical and pharmaceutical laboratories, biotech laboratories and universities in the

US and Western countries.

Muslim minorities were visible in the US, Britain and other Western countries.

He admitted that there had been distrust and misunderstanding between the minority and greater cultures of the host countries, occasionally based on real conflicts of interest or world views.

More often these stemmed from simple ignorance, he added.

However, the "us" and "them" mentality segregating Islam and other religions in the Western media was facing a strong challenge.

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