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Realisation of the real objectives of First Conference on Haj Guidance

Hayati Hayatudin

RECOMMENDATIONS made at the First Conference on Haj Guidance which took place in the capital city over the weekend look simple enough on the surface.

The delegates had agreed to organise workshops which would formulate a concised and detailed vision of the goals and methods for a haj pilgrim's awareness, guidance or orientation programme.

After all, that was the main objective of the conference - to create awareness among Islamic nations of the need for a guidance or orientation programme for intending pilgrims.

But then many questions come to mind like why was there a sudden need for a conference when in reality the pilgrimage has been organised for years.

When this question was put forth to several of the main figures in the conference like the Saudi Arabia Haj Minister Dr Iyad Ameen Madani and the Tabung Haji chief executive officer Datuk Badroddin Kassim, their answers were simple enough.

Dr Iyad said life was a learning process and no matter how old you were, there was always room for improvement.

The conference, he said, was an attempt to approach the guidance programmes for pilgrims more effectively.

Badroddin said something to that extent too - the current requirements of pilgrims in the Holy Land were based on the Saudi Arabian observation and opinions on how the pilgrims should behave and act.

There was a great need, he said, for the conference to take into consideration the experience and needs of other pilgrims from their own perspective.

It is true that the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina had been organised and taking place for years but at that time, the number of pilgrims were smaller, and since then, the physical needs of the pilgrims, their profile and age had changed.

Therefore, the Saudi Arabian government took the initiative to call for this inaugural conference and decided to hold it here as Malaysia is known for having a comprehensive and reputable guidance programme for pilgrims.

"Malaysia is one of the best organised countries during the haj ... from the way they fill up their immigration forms to the way they sleep in the camps at Mina," a delegate said.

The conference was fully funded by the Saudi Arabian government while Tabung Haji was the main organiser. Word has it that the latter had been working on the conference details for months.

So the day finally came and the venue was filled to the brim as there were about 150 delegates from 51 nations, not forgetting the secretariats, media and personal aides.

During the three-day conference, everybody mingled, exchanged ideas and contact numbers.

There was a strong feeling of brotherhood among those present. And that underlying objective was what the conference had actually achieved.

It was not so much the details of the guidance programme or how important it was to prepare the pilgrims for the haj.

It was about unity, co-operation and oneness among brothers.

If that was not the objectives, why else would Dr Iyad have said that he wanted pilgrims from different countries to interact more?

Pilgrims from different countries, he said, would be placed in one camp in Mina beginning next year's haj season to enable them to mingle and engage in cultural exchanges.

He had voiced his concern that pilgrims from one country always stayed together and this discouraged interaction.

"We want to encourage the pilgrims to interact, providing them with the opportunity to get closer.

"The camp will now have haj pilgrims from different countries, say 10,000 from Morocco, 10,000 from India, and 10,000 pilgrims from Malaysia, Egypt and so on."

The pilgrims will also be able to perform their haj and the rituals together as one to further emphasise brotherhood and unity among Muslims.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said in his speech at the opening of the conference that Muslims did not act as brothers anymore - they had divided into sects, picked quarrels and were constantly at odds with each other, and even at war with each other.

"They seemingly feel no longer as brothers. They seem to have rejected a cardinal principle of Islam that they are really one, the ummah.

"Muslims were fighting and killing Muslims everywhere to the extent that they sometimes condemned their Muslim enemies as being `kafir' (infidel), non-Muslims or apostates in order to justify their killing of fellow Muslims," Dr Mahathir had said.

Listening to these words and reflecting back at history and looking again at present happenings around the world will bring one to realise how true this is.

Listening to the delegates at the conference debate on how to reach their target and meet their objectives allows one to forget these dreadful events.

For in that conference room there was a spirit of oneness, unity, co-operation and a common goal.

They were calling each other brothers, giving each other "salam", kisses on the cheek and pats on the back.

The conference had, in reality, achieved more than it asked for. It managed to strengthen the Muslim ties and paved the way for future co-operation and propagate mutual understanding.

As Dr Mahathir aptly put it: "But the haj is more than just a religious ritual. It is a gathering of the ummah where there is a sense of oneness, a sense of being brothers as enjoined by Islam."

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