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Forum-Goh

SOUTHEAST ASIAN GOVTS MUST WIN SUPPORT OF MUSLIMS, SAYS S'PORE PM

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 8 (Bernama) -- Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Ong said South East Asian governments should try to understand the needs of Muslims in this region and win their support so that they do not become easy targets for recruitment by radical or extremist Muslim groups.

He said Muslims in South East Asia were generally moderate in outlook and it was important for governments to understand their interests to ensure that they were not oppressed or stifled in any way.

Of prime importance was allowing Muslims to practise their faith, having governments to interact with them and ensuring that they could keep up with the rest of society economically, he told a dialogue with media fellows at the East Asia Economic Summit, organised by World Economic Forum, which ended here today.

South East Asian governments, he said, were not against Islam in any way.

"If for some reason they (Muslims) are left behind and they are not able to enjoy the fruits of globalisation, then they become easy targets for the radicals to work on," he said.

However, Goh said this was easier said than done but it was "something that we have got to do."

In short, he said, South East Asian governments must not lose the support of moderate Muslims in the area and prevent them from becoming radicalised by extremist groups.

Goh also said it was also important for governments to co-operate and understand the tactics used by extremist groups, .

He said that when Singapore arrested 19 Jemaah Islamiah members, the authorities discovered that they were trying to overthrow Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mahathir in Malaysia by creating misunderstanding between Singapore and Malaysia.

"They were plotting to blow up or damage targets like the water pipeline and hope that Singapore would attack Malaysia in the belief that Malaysia was behind it."

He said the JI members were hoping that Singapore and Malaysia would react and somehow turn the situation into a Muslim and non-Muslim battle.

Such a situation would cause Muslims elsewhere to fight on behalf of the Muslims and also suggest that Dr Mahathir was not able to protect the interests of Muslims, he said.

Goh said the same situation had occurred in Ambong, Indonesia some time back when massive killings in that town was made out to a Christian and Muslim battle.

He stressed that extremists groups were not in the region on a temporary basis and they had permanent goals like "creating an Islamic state in this part of the world."

Goh said South East Asia was the "next theatre of operations" for extremist groups as they would take advantage of the democratic processes in this region, particular in Indonesia, to ensconce themselves and move into the centre of power.

"When they do that, you will find that you make it easier for other extremist groups to flourish not just in Indonesia but (elsewhere) in this part of the world where this zeal over Islam could move towards the next step for moderate Muslims to become radicals and terrorists."

Goh said co-operation between governments was important in defeating

extremist groups.

"We must be determined to defeat them. If we do not defeat them, they will defeat us," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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