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AIDS-Controversy

BEWARE OF ATTEMPTS TO INSULT ISLAM, SAYS FATWA CHAIRMAN

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, May 21 (Bernama) -- National Fatwa Council chairman Datuk Dr Ismail Ibrahim wants organisers of international conferences in Malaysia that involve Islamic issues to beware of attempts by certain groups to misinterpret the teachings of Islam for their own interests.

" In future we should be extra careful when organising such conferences because there are people who are out to use such a platform to serve their specific purpose, including by attacking Islam," he told Bernama on the sidelines of an ongoing international conference here of Muslim leaders on the Islamic approach to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The five-day Second International Muslim Leaders' Consultation on HIV/AIDS which began on Monday was upstaged yesterday by a walkout by many delegates who accused one of the speakers of blasphemy.

Dr Amina Wadud, an associate professor of Islamic studies at Virginia's Commonwealth University in the United States caused an uproar when she spoke of "Islam's failure" in combatting AIDS and that in Islam women are sex objects and tools for the pleasure of men.

Amina also accused Muslims of exacerbating the spread of AIDS, saying a traditional Islamic theological response "can never cure AIDS".

Ismail said: " The Quran cannot be interpreted according to one's own logic and personal interest or intention".

He said the organisers should have vetted papers to be presented at the conference as much time was wasted by speakers who debated on issues that were irrelevant to its theme of injecting the Islamic dimensions to fight the epidemic that kills millions annually.

" We should be discussing the role of Islamic leaders such as ulama in tackling HIV/AIDS, how to educate society to lay off behaviours that can expose them to this scourge and not be side-tracked by other irrelevant issues," he said of the conference organised jointly by the Islamic Development Department (Jakim) and the Malaysian AIDS Council.

The group which staged yesterday's walkout in a statement issued later said Amina had taken the Quran out of context and had deliberately used the conference to attack and insult Islam.

Nazlin Omar Fazaldin Rajput, a spokesman for the group, today urged Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin, who opened the conference on Monday, to make an official Malaysian government stand on Amina's paper amidst the controversy which continued into its second day today.

Nazlin, the international adviser on AIDS, women and gender in Kenya, regretted that members of the group which opposed Amina's paper and called for her expulsion from the conference had since been getting "negative treatment" from the conference organisers.

" We are being targeted and abused. Not only are we not allowed to take part in the workshops today, we are being sidelined. Our group is only trying to defend Islam from blasphemy and today I saw a new group of young participants mostly girls who were not present in the first two days, heckling at us.

" I appeal to the minister to intervene and to take up leadership in this issue and make a stand on Amina's attack on Islam," she said.

Dr Musa Nordin of the Islamic Medical Association (IMA) of Malaysia, who was among the most vocal critics of Amina's paper, said Amina had previously written a book entitled " " The Quran From Women's Perspective"

which was banned by the Malaysian government.

" Why did the organisers invite someone to talk about Islam when her book on Islam was banned by our government," he asked.

Meanwhile, in a special session this morning to discuss Amina's paper, the American academic and conference organisers came under fire from more delegates with several speakers calling on her to repent and to apologise to Muslims.

Prof Aly Mishal of Jordan and an imam from Gambia, Sheikh Lee Baba, said Islam gives equal treatment to women as to men and is completely against any forms of oppression of women and there are many instances to show this in the Quran.

Criticisms of the organisers led to Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir telling the morning's session that she had decided to offer her resignation as chairman of the conference which ends on Friday.

But this was met with a loud "No" from the delegates, prompting Marina, who is also Malaysian AIDS Council president, to agree to stay on.

Jakim Director-General Datuk Shahir Abdullah refused to comment on the controversy when approached by reporters.

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