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Muslims-HIV/AIDS

CONFERENCE REMOVES NEGATIVE VIEWS ON MUSLIMS' REACTION TO HIV/AIDS

By: Harlina Samson

KUALA LUMPUR, May 29 (Bernama) -- The recent international conference on the Islamic approach to fight HIV/AIDS, held here, has removed the notion that Muslims are not responding well to the issue.

Despite some "hiccups", the conference showed that Muslims cared for the well-being of their people and were willing to seek new ways to control the spread of the disease.

Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said the controversy which arose during the five-day Second International Muslim Leaders' Consultation (IMLC) on HIV/AIDS, had actually taught the participants true religiousness.

The fact that the controversial paper by Dr Amina Wadud, Virginia Commonwealth University's associate professor of Islamic Studies, was voluntarily retracted from the conference, had pushed the participants to deal with the real issue of HIV/AIDS.

Marina, IMLC's International Advisory Committee chairman, said this was a humble gesture which reflected true Muslim conduct that the participants had learnt.

"They (participants) felt closer to religion because they saw the act of religious people. It is very important to be humble as only God knows everything," Marina told Bernama in an interview on the outcome of the IMLC.

At the conference, Amina courted controversy when she spoke of Islam's failure to combat AIDS and that in Islam women were sex objects and tools for the pleasure of men.

This caused a stir and Amina was accused of committing blasphemy. She later retracted the paper and apologised for the choice of words and analogies which had offended the participants.

Marina said controversies were nothing new but what surprised the participants was the manner in which the objections were raised.

"I think it was the main point of contention for many people and whether it was necessary to do it this way and how helpful it was at the end," she said, referring to the harsh objections, walkouts and calls for Amina to repent by participants at the conference.

"At the end of day, I don't think it was helpful at all. It did not do anything for us to go forward. In fact, it distracted us but ultimately the end result was very good," she said.

Marina said the ILMC ended on a good note and that majority of the 250 participants felt the recommendations made were very useful.

"They felt that the discussions were very good and the list of recommendations was quite extensive.

"This is fine as some of the recommendations might be conservative while others might be too progressive or too liberal but that doesn't matter as you don't have to take it all. They are not rules, you only take what you need," she said.

Stating that the real issue was more people were getting infected by HIV/AIDS, Marina said the whole Muslim community including their religious leaders needed to act and respond collectively to the HIV/AIDS-related problems.

She said religious leaders should go down to the grassroots and provide adequate emotional and spiritual guidance to the HIV/AIDS sufferers.

Unfortunately, such moves could take some time and these sufferers

might have the impression that if they meet the religious leaders to seek guidance, they would be condemned for their past acts.

Nonetheless, she said these two different groups of people were not communicating.

"They (religious people) are in the mosques and the people who need help are out there somewhere.

"If nobody is going to see them (religious leaders) to ask for help, then they should be out there and show that they too care for these people (HIV/AIDS sufferers)".

Marina said Muslims should practise this humble spirit in their efforts to eradicate the HIV/AIDS pandemic and to understand better the true picture behind the spread of this disease.

She called for more HIV/AIDS awareness among Islamic religious leaders to enable them to play pivotal role in caring for those stricken by the disease.

"I think that it is a matter of education. Most people in this country failed to understand HIV/AIDS," she said.

Marina said there had been a lot of misunderstanding about HIV/AIDS and the MAC was working towards educating more religious leaders on the disease.

She said the IMLC was held to expose people to the reality of HIV/AIDS worldwide and to enable them to interact apart from formulating ideas on what could be done like infusing religious perspectives in dealing with the related issues.

She said the MAC was liaising with the Malaysian Islamic Advancement Department (JAKIM) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on the drawing out of a programme to train religious leaders to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

She said the council was also looking at possible collaborations and partnerships with other parties in their efforts to control the spread of the disease in Malaysia.

"To tackle the problem is to deal with everybody. Religious aspect is one thing but there are issues of poverty, medical, treatment and other inter-related things," she added.

-- BERNAMA

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