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AIDS-Walkout

WALKOUT AGAINST "ATTACK ON ISLAM" MARS ISLAMIC AIDS CONFERENCE

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, May 20 (Bernama) -- An international conference here on the Islamic approach to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic was marred by a walkout by many delegates in protest against a paper by an academician from the United States which they said openly attacked Islam.

Over 20 delegates mainly from Africa and some from Malaysia and the United Kingdom angrily stormed out of the conference hall at the Hotel Istana after not being allowed by the chairman of the session to rebut the paper by Dr Amina Wadud, an associate professor of Islamic studies at the Commonwealth University in Virginia.

While Dr Amina was presenting her paper, several delegates stood up asking to be allowed to respond to what they described as a blasphemy against Islam but Dr Ismail Baba, the chairman of the Country AIDS Services of Penang who chaired the session, insisted that the format of the session did not allow for any response from the floor.

The delegates then walked out and gathered in another room where they later issued a press statement calling on the conference organisers to expel Dr Amina from the conference and to expunge her paper from the records of the five-day Second International Muslim Leaders' Consultation on HIV/AIDS.

The conference which began yesterday was organised by the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (Jakim) and the Malaysian Aids Council.

Speaking on behalf of the group, Nazlin Omar Fazaldin Rajput, the International Islamic Adviser on AIDS, women and gender in Kenya, said Dr Amina's paper not only portrayed Islam as a failure in combating AIDS but also oppressive to women, and that women are sex objects and tools for the pleasure of men.

In her paper, Dr Amina spoke of the ways that Islam and Muslims exacerbate the spread of AIDS and that a traditional Islamic theological response "can never cure AIDS".

" She further alleges that not only can Islam not have a positive response to HIV/AIDS but that it enhances its spread," Nazlin said.

She said Dr Amina had taken the Quran out of context and had deliberately misused the conference to attack and insult Islam and the Quran.

" Her vicious and venomous attack to Islam is unfounded and unsubstantiated. As such she has also insulted, abused our faith and the worldwide Muslim leaders," said the statement which was signed by nine delegates on behalf a number of others, including the Chief Kadhi of Kenya, Sheikh Hammad Kassim, Dr Musa Nordin of the Islamic Medical Association (IMA) of Malaysia and Dr Abdl Majid El Katme of the IMA of United Kingdom.

Dr Abdul Majid said it was irresponsible for the organisers to have allowed Dr Amina's paper to be presented at a conference held in a Muslim country like Malaysia.

Answering a question, Nazlin Omar said the group would however not boycott the conference even if Dr Amina was not expelled because it was a very important forum to find ways of injecting the Islamic dimensions in fighting the scourge that kills millions annually, mostly in African countries.

" If we do that, then we are only playing into her (Dr Amina's) hands of wanting to hijack this important conference," she said.

But Dr Amina when approached by reporters later said she stood by her

paper, saying that the walkout was "unfortunate" and showed that people were unwilling to accept views that were different from theirs.

" I'm still in the learning process on Islam and I'm willing to learn from them. My paper just states opinions that are different from others and perhaps they take exception to that," she said.

Malaysian AIDS Council President Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, who is chairman of the International Advisory Committee of the conference, told reporters after an emergency meeting to discuss the walkout that the panel had decided not to expel Dr Amina from the conference.

She said no decision had been made on whether to expunge Dr Amina's paper from the records of the conference, saying discussion on the matter was still ongoing.

" The walkout by the delegates is something we regret happening. It is the objective of the conference to give space to different opinions. Surely we cannot expect a consensus on an issue like AIDS and as we quarrel over differences of opinion, Muslims everywhere are dying of AIDS," she said.

Marina said because of the controversy, the organisers had decided to allow for delegates to respond to points raised by paper presenters for the remaining part of the conference.

" The chairman is not to blame for not allowing response from the floor today as he was sticking to the format for the sake of saving time," she said.

Marina said a one-hour special session would be held tomorrow morning to enable the delegates to respond to Dr Amina's paper so as not to derail the conference.

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