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AIDS: `Religious leaders must be involved`

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Religious leaders must mobilise the Islamic faith to help AIDS sufferers and prevent the epidemic from spreading.

To do this, they themselves must change their attitude and understand that Islam encourages fellow Muslims to help the sick, even if it means the pandemic carried a stigma.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin said these leaders, who were highly influential among Muslims, should emulate the leaders of other faiths who had played pivotal roles in caring for those infected and carried out programmes to educate communities about the dangers of exposure to HIV/AIDS.

He said Muslim leaders had responded poorly to the epidemic. In fact, some of them had completely dissociated themselves from any role or responsibility in dealing with sufferers.

"These types of responses have an effect on faith. Ulama behaving like that can prompt Muslims to question their own religion. They should stop condemning and care.

"Instances like Imam refusing to conduct burial rites, which sadly does happen, must be stopped," he added.

Speaking at the opening of the Second International Muslim Leaders Consultation on HIV/AIDS here today, he reminded religious leaders to understand that Islam does not condone turning away from those in need and urged them to increase their knowledge and understanding of HIV/AIDS.

A better understanding would prevent prejudice and fear that could lead to discrimination against the sufferers.

The event was timely, Abdul Hamid said. Muslim religious authorities must be united in addressing the pandemic. Some 300 representatives of non-governmental organisations, religious scholars and thinkers from 38 countries including Uganda, Somalia and the United States, took part.

Dealing with the issue from an Islamic perspective was essential. The spiritual strengths, integrity and leadership qualities that Muslim leaders possessed would help greatly in reducing the problem.

The consultation would enable the participants to share their experiences on containing HIV/AIDS. Malaysia could adopt some of them to better address the problem of the increasing number of sufferers.

Statistics until 2002 showed there were 51,000 HIV-positive persons, while 5,400 had died of AIDS. Last year's figures revealed that 7,000 more people tested positive for HIV. Most of them were Muslims, involved in drug abuse.

Steps taken by the Government to ensure response from Muslim leaders and increasing awareness of the problem included ensuring Friday sermons on HIV/AIDS.

A module to train religious leaders to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS, an initiative of the Health Ministry, Malaysian AIDS Council and Malaysian Islamic Development Department would be implemented by the year's end. To be held until May 23 the meeting, jointly organised by MAC and Jakim, is themed "A Caring Ummah: Transforming the Response".

MAC president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said the meeting was another step towards changing the image of the Muslim world, where the epidemic was concerned.

She said a lot must be done to change the perception that Muslim countries have not been responding well to HIV/AIDS.

"We have to come up with new thoughts on how to deal realistically with the issue," she said adding the meeting would show the Muslim ummah cared about the well-being of its people and was willing to forge new ways to manage the problem.

Marina concurred when asked if the problem could have been better contained if religious leaders had played a more active role in controlling the spread of the disease.

However she expressed optimism that the problem would be better managed as more parties including religious bodies were coming forward to involve themselves.