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Learn from Uganda, says Dr Siti Hasmah

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Malaysian leaders, especially Muslim religious heads, have a lot to learn from Uganda on educating the community on HIV and AIDS, said Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

Describing the community's acceptance of the issue as "worrying", she said a drastic change of attitude would make it easier to instill awareness and slow down the spread of the epidemic.

Addressing delegates on the first day of the Second International Muslim Leaders' Consultation on HIV/ AIDS here today, she expressed her amazement that religious leaders in Uganda were "open" when it came to educating their young on the issue.

She recalled a visit, during her trip to Uganda with her husband Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad three years ago, to Dr Majid Kagimu in Kampala, who runs a Muslim AIDS programme, and said she was surprised people were prepared to come to terms with the problem and address it.

"We have to be able to talk to children in a language they can understand. When there is a pressing need and the use of words considered taboo is inevitable, there is no choice but to say it.

"In Uganda, imam were free to discuss the issue. The mention of condoms here would raise eyebrows. In Uganda, they are free to talk about it as it can prevent AIDS."

She commended the Ugandan Government for successfully getting its people and religious bodies involved in containing the epidemic there.

Leaders here, she added would have to learn more from the Ugandan experience.

Meanwhile, Masjid Negara imam Datuk Pirdaus Ismail said Ugandan Imam and mufti had done a great job.

They had taken on the role of doctors when it came to educating the Muslims on HIV/ AIDS.

"They showed sympathy and showered the victims with love," he added.

"Many of us may see this as a punishment from God. But it could be His way of telling us to repent and return to the true teachings of Islam," he added.

Datuk Dr Faisal Ibrahim of the Health Ministr's Public Health Department (Disease Control Division) said the epidemic's spread here was a big cause for worry.

"It should not be that way. There is no forcing into commercial sex trade to support their livelihood. It is just unhealthy habits and lack of knowledge that has contributed to the seriousness of the issue."