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Mixed feelings on HIV/AIDS conference

Farrah Naz Karim; June Ramli

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The Second International Muslim Leaders' Consultation on HIV/AIDS ended today with participants having mixed feelings on the outcome of the five-day event.

Advisory committee chairman Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said the conference ended on a good note, adding that participants were wiser on the subject discussed, which was Islam and the pandemic.

"The fact that the consultation even happened was more than we had hoped for, especially with the United States-led war on Iraq and SARS," she said in her closing speech.

"We have taken a step further in combating the pandemic and this could be the beginning of something which is really important.

"We did reach out to people although many may have not seen it but our efforts will be seen in due time. Let us not dwell on the controversial issues that took place during the conference as the programme went smoothly and was not disrupted," she said.

"You need some controversy to learn something and if everything was cosy then we might not have learned the reality of the pandemic," she added.

Marina was optimistic there would be more conferences like the IMLC conducted internationally.

She also hoped that more religious leaders and Malaysians would have a better understanding now on the issue.

"If we look at other countries such as Africa, they are more advanced in the pandemic compared to us. By changing the attitude of one or two Malaysians through the conference, we have already done our best," she said.

Public Health Department of the Disease Control Division deputy director (AIDS/STI) Datuk Dr Faisal Ibrahim said the conference was successful in tackling the issues of HIV/AIDS despite the "hiccups" that arose during the proceedings.

"Despite our obvious differences, I think we all agree to a certain level that Muslim leaders should go down to the grassroots and play their part in combating the pandemic.

"I want to convey this message to Muslim leaders here that they are not alone in combating HIV/AIDS. The Health Ministry needs their leadership to fight it," he said.

Participant Roslan Hamzah, who has been HIV-positive for the past 13 years, felt the conference was "misused" by some, making it a platform to discuss sexuality instead of HIV/AIDS.

"I accept that Islam prohibits homosexuality, but is there no place for me in society? They should find the answers for people like me," he said.

Muslim Youth Movement manager Juriah Bakar, who has been working with HIV/AIDS persons for over a year, felt the objectives of the conference had been achieved although discussions were not focused.

All recommendations made at the conference will be forwarded to a newly-established special committee for vetting.

The special committee, whose establishment was announced today, comprises six ulama.

They are Ugandan mufti Sheikh Shaban Ramadhan Mubajje, United Nations Human Resources Centre's Runizar Roesin, Ivory Coast Islamic National Council imam Cisse Djiguiba, Kenya chief kadi Sheikh Hammad Kassim, the United States imam Tabib Abdul Rashid and Malaysian Islamic Development

Department (Jakim) director-general Datuk Mohamad Shahir Abdullah.