

09/07/2003

## Muslim scholars to focus on economics

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Two speakers who are usually not associated with the realm of "Islamic Scholarship" are scheduled to speak at the three-day World Conference on Islamic Scholars starting Thursday.

One of them is National Economic Action Council executive director Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, while the other is Petronas president Tan Sri Hassan Marican.

Both are scheduled to deliver working papers at the conference to be held at Putrajaya Marriot.

The papers are expected to relate to managing a country's resources and oil production.

They reflect the thrust of the conference, which is to impress upon Muslims the need to prioritise political and economic development as a means of fulfilling the tenets of Islam.

Conference chairman Tan Sri Abdul Hamid Othman said: "According to the Quran, Muslims must strengthen themselves to protect the sanctity and honour of the religion.

"In the era of globalisation, such strength is derived not just from military might, but knowledge and technological achievement."

He added that although many Islamic countries were rich in resources, most notably petroleum, they lacked the ability to manage and harness that wealth.

This caused them to be "poor" in terms of education and other sectors of the economy and politics.

"That is why they are easily invaded and defeated as in the case of Iraq. Not only that, but other Islamic countries were powerless as to what to do when Iraq was attacked," Abdul Hamid, who is also Religious Adviser to the Prime Minister, said.

The conference, called a multaqa or "confluence", aims to gather prominent Islamic thinkers not just to speak on the theological aspects of Islam such as aqidah (faith), but like its theme "Islam in the Era of Globalisation", on making Islam relevant tomorrow.

In addition to national development, issues which would be highlighted include the role of opposition parties and non-governmental organisations in Muslim societies, the status of Muslim women in the modern era, terrorism, pluralism in Islamic society and the role of religious movements in promoting world peace.

"Muslims generally don't think of the azan as being anything but a call to prayers. What is inserted in the azan is a phrase which can be interpreted as a call to work hard and achieve success. But that is missed by most Muslims," Abdul Hamid said.

The conference, he continued, would point out the "civilisational" aspects of the religion, such as the commandment to eradicate poverty and provide jobs for the youth.

Abdul Hamid added the first word in the Quran means "read", not "pray" or "fast" thus stressing the importance of pursuing knowledge.

"The multaqa is like a river or a confluence of many different streams of Islamic thought, brought together to feed those who live on its banks, in this case the ummah.

"The ideas expressed are meant to be used by Muslim societies to develop and strengthen themselves in the face of challenges posed by globalisation."

Another goal of the conference is to deal with the spread of extremism and the rivalry between factions in the ummah over who was more "Islamic".

The issue of extremism is related to the earlier issue of national development, said Abdul Hamid.

This was important as many Muslim Governments, including Malaysia, are being labelled as un-Islamic or secular by certain sections of the Muslim societies, due to their focus on development.

"Muslims have been taught that jihad (struggle) means to go and fight and die in the streets. But actually, jihad is about strengthening oneself, about building one's technological and economic strength," he said.

Abdul Hamid hoped the keynote address by the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Dr Mohammad Sayyed Tantawi, would clarify what was true religiousness, which is not about dress, but about actions to develop one's nation.

The end objective of the conference is to establish a secretariat which would act as a "seminary" where scholars gather, study and research on matters pertaining to Islam in the modern context.

The secretariat would also collect and continuously disseminate the writings and thoughts of Islamic scholars.

A summary of the thoughts and ideas discussed at the conference would be presented at the closing ceremony in the form of resolutions.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is scheduled to open the conference while Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is expected to officiate at its closing.

Among the speakers at the conference are Dr Zaki Badawi from London, Fathi Othman from the United States, Dr Fahmi Huwaidi and Dr Abdul Halim Uwais, both from Egypt, Dr Ali Al-Shuayby from Syria and Dr Chandra Muzaffar from Malaysia.

The conference is expected to attract 85 Islamic thinkers and 700 participants.