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## Towards Islamic excellence

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THE Multaqa Ulama or World Conference of Islamic Scholars held in Putrajaya last month ended on a high note with the adoption of a nine-point resolution on uplifting the Muslim ummah (adherents) in various fields in the wake of globalisation.

The gathering of 900 ulamas from 34 countries including Malaysia - with some 90 participants from abroad - ended with a proposal to form a permanent secretariat in Kuala Lumpur and a blueprint to push forward efforts to achieve Islamic excellence in various fields.

The three-day conference, themed 'Islam in the Era of Globalisation', was organised by the Malaysian Government and officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In his keynote opening address, Dr Mahathir called on Muslim scholars to play their part in bringing back the glory days of Islam and to overcome misinterpretation of the religion, which he said had split the Muslims.

He urged the participants to encourage Muslims to acquire knowledge in all areas including science and technology.

A total of 23 working papers were presented, on topics ranging from globalisation, poverty and management of resources to women, military, education, terrorism and the role of Muslim non-governmental organisations.

The conference was boosted by the presence of prominent scholars including Sheikh Al-Azhar Dr Mohammad Sayed Tantawi of Egypt, who described Malaysia as a model of a progressive Islamic nation.

The proposal to set up a permanent secretariat was brought up by Malaysia and it received rousing support from the ulamas. The secretariat is seen as vital to foster cooperation and interaction among Muslim scholars and intellectuals around the globe. It is expected to be fully funded by Malaysia.

Chairman of the organising committee, Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Othman, said the secretariat would be akin to a Muslim think-tank but with a specific framework and plan of action.

'Our aim is to gather the great minds and opinion leaders within our ummah to deliberate on issues faced by Muslims and to further develop moderate thinking. The Muslim community has experts and professionals in almost every field; the permanent secretariat will establish a working network and tap valuable information for the benefit of Muslims worldwide,' he said.

For instance, he added, in the areas of investment, the experts could undertake research on ways and means to further develop and strengthen the financial and economic systems of the Islamic countries.

They could also collaborate in other areas such as promoting tourism and the production and export of halal food. 'We must promote our products in good faith and without inviting unwarranted resentment from any quarter. There are enough Muslims to be a market for their own products,' he said.

Abdul Hamid said Kuala Lumpur would draw up the appropriate framework for the secretariat as soon as possible. He noted that the initiative was similar to the country's efforts in promoting Islamic banking and the International Islamic University.

The resolution, one of nine endorsed by the ulamas, was read out at a media conference by the chairman of the main committee of the conference, Datuk Mohamed Nakhaie Ahmad.

The conference also called for serious efforts to free Muslims from the shackles of poverty, backwardness and other forms of oppression to enable the ummah to preserve its rights and freedom to lead life as enjoined by Islam.

The Islamic scholars also agreed on the importance of creating awareness among Muslims of the perils of globalisation.

'There are many among the ummah who are not keeping abreast of rapid development .... they are still with their outdated thinking which is not in sync with globalisation. So, we have to address this,' Abdul Hamid said.

The ulamas also agreed to initiate efforts to enhance the economy of the ummah by managing their wealth and resources systematically, and to establish a resilient economy and increase cooperation via smart partnerships.

The other resolutions endorsed were:

- \* To raise the status of women as part of human resources in the development of mankind.

- \* To promote and strengthen the knowledge culture among Muslims with emphasis on divine knowledge.

- \* To strengthen ties and cooperation among Muslims in building a resilient ummah based on Islamic-universal teachings.

- \* To call on the Muslim World to build up their military force and not depend on foreign powers by intensifying research and development activities, intelligence, military technology and training as well as building up the spirit of jihad.

- \* To foster friendly ties between the ulamas and umara (leaders) to create a society which is harmonious, stable and progressive.

National Economic Action Council executive director Datuk Mustapa Mohamed said Islamic nations need not lament the fact that they had not been able to form their own economic bloc so far.

Instead, they must develop their own countries, including through smart partnerships with their counterparts in both developed and Muslim nations that were experts in the fields of science and technology.

'We need not necessarily form an economic bloc like the one by the European Union as what is important is that continuous efforts be made to develop the Muslim nations to ensure they are not poor and colonised by the West,' said Mustapa in his paper 'Managing the Resources of the Country Wisely for the Ummah in Facing Global Competitiveness: Malaysia's Experience'.

He said strategic partnerships should be formed to allow the transfer of technology among both Muslims and non-Muslims to counter competition in a globalised economy dominated by the United States.

Mustapa said Islamic banking in Malaysia had shown good growth, commanding 9.9% of assets and 8.9% of deposits of the overall banking system at end-March 2003. Total assets of the Islamic banking system were RM70.3 billion at end-March, against RM68.1 billion at end-2002.

The conference also proposed the setting up of an investment corporation funded by oil-producing Islamic Development Bank (IDB) member countries, to address the capital resource inadequacy within member countries.

Petronas president and CEO Tan Sri Hassan Marican said it was necessary that IDB countries set up a capital formation mechanism to accumulate and build capital resources to fund investments on productive capacities within member countries.

He suggested that contributions, to be made on quarterly or monthly basis, be set at 1.5% of the value of oil produced and be considered as capital fund instead of a loan or grant. Profit made by the corporation would be distributable as dividends to contributors.

Hassan made the proposals in his working paper presented by Petronas vice-president Datuk Ishak Imam Abas.

He said based on current oil production of IDB member countries of 31.2 million barrels per day and using oil price of US\$18 a barrel, the 1.5% would represent a capital formation of US\$768.7 million per quarter or US\$3.1 billion annually.

The investment by the corporation in IDB member countries would relieve those countries of the normal and usual obligations and implications of external borrowings, he added.

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