

Najib offers to help Obama overcome Islamophobia
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NEW YORK – Malaysia wants to assist the United States in overcoming Islamophobia among the American society to allow them a better understanding of Islam and dispel negative perceptions towards the religion, Najib Abdul Razak said.

The Malaysian prime minister said he conveyed the matter to US President Barack Obama during his intervention at the second Asean-US meeting in New York on Friday.

The prime minister also congratulated Obama for his firm stand against the recent plan by a Florida pastor to burn the Quran.

The pastor later cancelled the plan.

Although the Asean-US meeting touched mainly on trade, security and regional matters, Najib took the opportunity to draw Obama's attention to the issue of Islamophobia, a phenomenon which has been on the increase in the US lately.

The online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, defines Islamophobia as "an irrational fear or prejudice towards Islam and Muslims."

"The most important step is to provide the basic knowledge about Islam; that Islam carries universal values, a progressive religion which is very much in line with the concept of modernisation.

"Islam also guarantees the rights of not only Muslims but also that of the non-Muslims," he told Malaysian journalists who were here to cover his six-day visit to New York.

The Islamophobia phenomenon escalated following proposals to build an Islamic centre and a mosque in the vicinity of the "Ground Zero", the site of the Sept 11, 2001 attacks which destroyed the World Trade Centre.

The Florida pastor called off his plan to burn copies of the Quran, which he earlier said was to commemorate the anniversary of the Sept 11 terror attacks.

President Obama stressed that the plan would benefit the al-Qaeda and endanger thousands of US troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Asked on ways to overcome Islamophobia, Najib stressed that there was a need to provide a better understanding of Islam among the American people.

Citing as example a recent study by Time magazine which showed that 26 per cent of American thought President Obama was a Muslim, Najib said: "This means that in the US, the knowledge (about Islam) is low and there is a need to promote understanding on what Islam is all about."

If the Palestinian people chose peace, and not conflict, as the way forward, Najib said, this meant that they could look into the future with a brighter hope.

"There is a semblance of hope in the West Bank although there are still problems internally,

with Hamas, in the efforts to move forward as one voice," Najib said in a *Bernama* report.

On his meeting with US Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, Najib said they discussed about a mission by a Malaysian medical team on the invitation of the Afghan government.

Najib said Holbrooke told him of the devastation caused by the flood in Pakistan which affected 20 million people, a disaster described as worse than the Asian tsunami.

"The flood victims are hit by immense sufferings and there is destruction to homes, schools and roads. In terms of the social aspect, the disaster is worse in scale than the tsunami," he said.

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