

Curb the extremists in our midst, says PM

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■ By Wan Hamidi Hamid

news@nst.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. — No one should underestimate the power of religion as a conscience for people to act, said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

In the face of fanaticism and hysteria, the Prime Minister said all parties must take action to call for moderation and rationality.

“Let us start now by curbing the extremists in our midst.

“We must put a stop to the mockery of any religion or the sacrilege of any symbol held sacred by the faithful,” he said, in reference to the controversial caricatures of Prophet Muhammad which had sparked riots in many parts of the world.

“The rhetoric of war will not help. The writings of the mighty pen based on prejudices will also not help,” he said when addressing the international conference ‘Who speaks for Islam? Who speaks for the West’ by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations here.

The controversy has resulted in a blanket ban of the caricatures originally published in a Danish newspaper.

It also prompted the Government to suspend the publishing licence of the *Sarawak Tribune* which ran the caricatures last weekend to illustrate a story on the controversy over them.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who also spoke at the conference, said the fire that had raged through Europe and most of the Muslim world would not kindle in Malaysia, adding that nothing could be gained by violence and carnage.

“Of course as a Muslim, it is not easy to turn the other cheek when Islam is being attacked and vilified. But we have to understand the very essence of our religion is the advocating of peace, and not violence,” he said.

When asked to elaborate, Syed Hamid said he hoped the issue would not bring conflicts because there were other important issues to be resolved such as the Middle

East crisis that needed more attention.

“We are faced with misunderstandings and conflicts. There is a need for bridge-builders (of peace) to create confidence-building,” he said.

In his speech, Abdullah said the world should listen to the voice of many groups in the West who realised that the existence of Western hegemonic power and the demonisation of Islam were not conducive for global peace.

Likewise, he said there were groups and individuals in the Muslim world who were distressed by the violence and terror perpetrated by certain fringe Muslim groups, just as they were equally uncomfortable with the sweeping denunciations of Christians, Jews and the West.

“They do oppose hegemony and occupation (of Muslim lands) but their words are authentic voices of Islam,” he said.

Abdullah, also the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) chairman, said the mainstream media

should give attention to these groups as they shared a common perspective on some of the critical challenges facing both worlds.

He added that both groups were opposed to hegemony, rejected violence and terror, hoped for a just and peaceful world, and united by a common bond.

“It is this common bond that makes them bridge-builders. One of our most urgent tasks is to multiply the bridge-builders.

“We must develop through the family, through education and the media, tens of thousands of men and women who can be critical of the weaknesses and wrongdoings of one’s civilisation and, at the same time, are empathic towards ‘the other’ civilisation.

“When the bridge-builders reach a critical mass, their collective power would become so overwhelming that it would destroy the walls erected by those who are hell-bent on keeping Islam and the West apart,” he said.