

THE STAR

Praise for religious pluralism

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Malaysia's system can help against rising intolerance in world, says Annan

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's enviable system of religious pluralism can play an important role in a world dangerously divided by religious faiths, former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said.

He added that there was an urgent need for dialogue for a globalised era marked by rising intolerance, extremism and violence against each other.

Annan said in his inaugural lecture of the Khazanah Global Lectures at a hotel here last night that the Sept 11 terror attacks, war and turmoil in the Middle East, ill-considered words and drawings have helped to reinforce mutual distrust even with closer proximity and improved communications, and these had inflamed tensions between different peoples and cultures.

He also said many people in the Muslim world see the West as a threat to their beliefs and values.

Likewise, many in the West dismissed Islam as a religion of extremism and violence despite a history of relations in commerce, cooperation and cultural exchanges, he added.

"It is vital that we overcome these resentments and establish relations of trust between communities.

"We must start reaffirming - and not demonstrating - that the problem is not the faith; it is the faithful and how they behave towards each other.



Friendly meeting: Annan shaking hands with Abdullah during a session of the Khazanah Global Lectures at a hotel in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. With them is Abdullah's wife, Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah.

"Malaysia can help do this by showing a different face to the world, one where differing people of different faiths coexist peacefully," he said.

Among those who attended the

lecture were Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, moderator and former president of the United Nations General Assembly Tan Sri Razali Ismail and Khazanah Nasional Bhd managing director

Datuk Azman Mokhtar.

Annan said Abdullah's ideas urging everyone to return to the humanistic principles of faith in Islam Hadhari was aimed at striking a healthy balance between religious

dogma and the mastery of knowledge needed to tackle modern global challenges.

On Malaysia, Annan said the country was very fortunate because of how it was developed through its inception as a nation.

"The complex mathematics of ethnicity and religion in the country meant that a delicate system of managing pluralism has evolved.

"Few other countries in the world have been so consistently at peace with such a diverse mix of race and religion," he added.

Annan also said Malaysia's unique experience of development offered a more appropriate model for less developed countries in Africa to learn from.

He added that the growing divide between developed and developing nations would be more easily bridged if there was stronger South-South cooperation.

Annan later took part in a question-and-answer session with students of local universities through a live video link and also answered questions from the floor.

The lecture was part of Khazanah's Merdeka Series of lectures, seminars and forums.

Managing director of Grameen Bank Prof Mohammad Yunus will speak on Aug 15, while former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz would present his speech on Aug 29.