

FOCUS ON ISLAM ISSUES IN PM'S SAUDI VISIT

Anwar, OIC plan out how grouping, Malaysia can rein in Islamophobia and support Palestine



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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, in his maiden visit to Saudi Arabia, has begun paving the way for the Muslim world to effectively address pressing issues affecting them.

On the first day of his official visit to the kingdom yesterday, Anwar and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) met to plan out what the grouping — and Malaysia, as one of its active members — could do to rein in Islamophobia and address the fate of Palestine.

He said Islamophobia must be tackled before it gets out of hand, as it is already at dangerous levels.

"This anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiment is simply madness, more so when stoked by some irresponsible parties in the West.

"There must be a willingness at the international level to address and to take a strong stand against this," he said.

Malaysia and OIC, whose delegation was led by its secretary-general, Hissein Brahim Taha, also discussed the issue of Afghanistan, particularly the lack of education opportunities for women in the country.

Anwar told the delegation that more needed to be done to support Palestine's struggles, adding that Malaysia and the OIC could do more in its commitment to the Palestinian cause.

He said Malaysia had conveyed to the OIC representative looking at issues in Afghanistan that women in the country should be allowed more education opportunities.



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his delegation receiving a welcome from Jeddah Governor Prince Saud bin Abdullah bin Jalawi Al Saud yesterday. PIC BY SADIQ ASYRAF/PRIME MINISTER

"They can choose any system they want, but they cannot deny women the right to education. That was our message," he said.

Kuala Lumpur also shared with the grouping positive developments in Muslim-majority Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines.

On his three-day working visit to Saudi Arabia, Anwar said it would be a platform for Kuala Lumpur and Riyadh to discuss new opportunities, as well as issues of mutual interest to both countries.

Anwar, who is here at the invitation of the Saudi government, is scheduled to pay a courtesy call on King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Abdulaziz Al-Saud, who is also Saudi Arabia's prime minister.

Anwar arrived at King Khalid International Airport in Jeddah yesterday before performing the umrah here.

The Malaysian entourage was guided by a Saudi-sponsored student Mohamad Zarif Misbari, 25, who is pursuing Syariah Studies at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah.

Anwar is accompanied by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir and Communications and Digital Minister Fahmi Fadzil.

Malaysian ambassador to Saudi Arabia Datuk Wan Zaidi Wan Abdullah earlier told the Malaysian media covering the trip that Anwar's visit would allow Kuala Lumpur and Riyadh to build on their close ties while exploring

new opportunities and strengthening existing ones.

Anwar is expected to deliver a keynote address during his visit to the Islamic Development Bank here today.

"These meetings will be a platform for the prime minister and the relevant leaders to discuss various issues of interest involving Malaysia.

"They will also serve as a vehicle for the prime minister to explore economic opportunities that the Malaysian business community can venture into in Saudi Arabia, as well as to promote Malaysia as a major investment destination in the Southeast Asian region," Wan Zaidi said.

He added that several memoranda of understanding are expected to be signed, involving co-operation between government agencies of the two countries and the private sector.

Today, the prime minister will meet Malaysians in Jeddah before making his way to Madinah for a visit.

Saudi Arabia is Malaysia's largest trading partner, the third largest export destination and the largest source of imports in the West Asian region last year, with bilateral trade amounting to RM45.52 billion (US\$10.26 billion), an increase of 159.2 per cent compared with the previous year.

Wan Zaidi said total exports to Saudi Arabia increased by 43.8 per cent for the same period, amounting to RM7.28 billion (US\$1.66 billion), while total imports from Saudi Arabia saw an increase of 205.8 per cent, amounting to RM38.24 billion (US\$8.60 billion).