

AT THE OPENING OF THE SECOND GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF RISEAP

KOMPLEK TABUNG HAJI, SUBANG, 04 JUNE 1983

It is a great pleasure to be given the opportunity to address the Second General Assembly of the Regional Islamic Dakwah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific and to be associated with the representatives of Muslim voluntary organisations from sixteen countries in the region. I would like to thank the President of RISEAP, Yang Teramat Mulia Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj, for inviting me to address this distinguished gathering again this year.

2. There are almost fifty independent Muslim states with a population of about 700 million. Apart from this, there are about 300 million Muslims in other countries where they form the minority. A gradual improvement in their economic position has aroused great interest in the role of the Muslim world in the creation of a new world order.

3. Muslim states and peoples are steadily strengthening the bonds of unity and are developing institutions to foster it. The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and its associated organisations, such as the Islamic Solidarity Fund, the Islamic Development Bank, the Islamic Foundation for Science, Technology and Development, and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, are some of the structures contributing towards Islamic solidarity.

4. In the Southeast Asia and Pacific region, I am glad to note that RISEAP has managed to instill greater unity and effective cooperation amongst the Islamic communities in this region. The initiative taken to foster Islamic solidarity through voluntary organisations is an important complementary effort to the regular activities of Islamic nations. The trend clearly indicates that Muslims are eager to overcome their state of helplessness and deprivation through the guidance of the Holy Quran and Sunnah, and to gain for themselves their rightful position in the community of nations. attention due to its geopolitical importance, its expanding economic worth and the increasing assertiveness of Muslim minorities in their claim to just rights in a multi-cultural world. Muslims are being closely observed for any influence they may exert as a result of their religious and cultural heritage. Indeed the richness of the Muslim world lies in its religious, cultural and ideological heritage. It can bring fresh approaches in solving the problems faced by modern man, based on its ideals of justice and the brotherhood of man, ideals which are vital to the realisation of an equitable world order.

6. Unfortunately, the attention given to the Muslim world especially by the western media is far too often biased, presenting a picture of the efforts of Muslims to inculcate proper Islamic values and practise the teachings of Islam as something to be feared. The efforts of Muslims to make the principles and ideals of their faith play a more meaningful role in the development of a just and prosperous society is portrayed as the work of a strange group of people they refer to as the 'fundamentalists'. This term, which is borrowed from western terminology and religious experience, according to the dictionary, means "an extreme Protestant position characterised by the belief that the Bible is a verbally accurate recording of the word of God" or "adherence to traditional beliefs of any kind". In this connection all Muslims must be fundamentalists of the first type. We know for certain that the Quran revealed to Muhammad 1,400 years ago is the direct revelation of God to mankind and is of universal applicability. As far as tradition is concerned Islam is wisdom that withstand all falsehood.

7. The current revival of Islamic awareness comes at a time when the dominant ideologies of socialism, capitalism and communism are being questioned for failing to deliver the goods. It is equally necessary for non-Muslims, just like the Muslims, to examine the message of Islam with openness and without prejudice. If Islam has nothing to offer, why worry about it? If it has something to offer, why deny it to yourselves? The efforts of the Malaysian Government to establish an Islamic Bank and an International Islamic University, and to foster positive values in accordance with the teachings of Islam, have been criticised and misinterpreted by the international media and certain correspondents of international journals and magazines. The deliberate alarmism and sensationalism of these ignorant and biased critics, who have made no effort to first of all understand the Islamic principles, has created an image of Islam as a religion which does not need to be understood, but only to be feared. Their malicious distortions and ignorance have created a climate of fear. It is unfortunate that the sophistication in communication technology is not being applied to creating better understanding of Islam, the religion of a thousand million people, but rather to create unnecessary fears and prejudices against Islam and its followers.

8. Of course, in every religion and ideology, we find extremists, but I would venture to say that the percentage of fanatics and extremists in Islam is much less than that found in other faiths. No one presents Jimmy Jones as a person typical of the Christians or the Spanish Inquisition as a manifestation of Christian theocracy. These are all aberrations, the exceptions to the rule. And so the few extremists in Islam should not be pictured as evidence that Islam is to be feared, that its revival bodes ill for the world, particularly of the non-Muslim world.

9. It is wrong for these biased critics to imply that the fostering of an Islamic way of life would endanger the rights of non-Muslims. An objective reading of history indicates that the Islamic system really guarantees the protection of the rights of minorities. Islam, since the days of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), has recognised non-Muslims as an ummah, or community on par with the Muslim community, with the full rights to realise themselves according to their own legacy and genius. In history we can see that the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Hindus and Buddhists were included in the Islamic state as ummahs on par with the ummah of the Muslims. The Islamic system was their guarantor and protector, whose duty, as defined by its own constitution, was to enable each group to live in accordance with its own religion, society and culture, and to perpetuate itself through generations in perfect freedom. The Islamic state thus enables those of different religions and cultures to live harmoniously and in peace with one another. This is a unique phenomenon on earth and history knows no parallel.

10. The biased and prejudiced western media which talk of the spread of fires of Islamic revolutionary fervour are protecting the vested interests of certain groups, namely the interests of the super-powers. Instead of making any effort to understand the teachings of Islam in relation to socio-economic and political developments, the press and television accentuates the creation of doubt and hesitation on the capacity of Islam to deal with the problems confronting the modern world. In addition, doubt has also been created about the purity of Islamic intentions.

11. Most of the so-called western 'experts' on Islam are extremely ignorant of even the most basic of Islamic teachings regarding the major issues facing mankind, and they do not even have the basic working knowledge of Islamic history or current affairs. For example in a recent book, one so-called 'expert' has said "In Malaysia, partly under Iranian influence, Muslim fundamentalists are throwing their television sets into the river and ripping the comfortable upholstery out of their cars, replacing it with wooden benches"

(Janson: Militant Islam). I would like to invite him to conduct a thorough search of the Malaysian rivers for dumped television sets and highways for cars with wooden seats. This 'expert' would also like the Muslims to reject

12. In the coverage of the resurgence of Islam, the western media gives unfavourable labels to Muslims and favourable ones to the adversaries of the Muslims. Muslim groups, fighting to maintain their Islamic identity against oppressive regimes are most often called 'terrorists', 'aggressors', 'insurgents' or 'separatists', but not freedom fighters. Labels such as 'extremist vs. moderate' and 'fundamentalist vs progressive' are used with ulterior motives.

13. Efforts to discredit the Islamic resurgence and the Islamic way of life will surely continue for so long as the Muslims stand firm, holding to their values and institutions, free from any super-power in the world. Islam must be freed from any form of neo-imperialistic influences, so it can give its own answer to the world's desire for a true and lasting peace.

14. The Muslim world, including the Muslim minorities, must find ways to meet this challenge of disinformation about Islam, propagated by the so-called protagonists of the free press. Since you met last year, the situation of Muslims, including the minorities has not improved appreciably. In fact in many countries of the world, the Muslims are worse off than they were last year. Muslims have still not been able to obtain the same degree of tolerance for them, as is given to non-Muslims in Muslim countries. The brutal slaughter of Muslims in Assam, and the refugee camps of Beirut, shows how little regard is given to life and property. Part of the fault must lie with the Muslims. In a world that recognises only strength, the Muslims are weak. They are backward in terms of knowledge and skills. They are divided against themselves. They know all these and they know the answers to their problems. But unfortunately they succumb too easily to their weaknesses and make little effort to act and to persist.

15. It is obligatory for Muslim minorities to solve their problems. We are taught to respect others and for others to respect our rights. The solution is a nation-wide community organisation which must be based on two principles -- discipline and resources. Without discipline, there can never be a group, and without resources, there can never be activities. Muslims who have organised themselves into communities have followed these principles thus enabling them to continue as a community. Without discipline and resources the community will become weak and tend to disintegrate and disappear. In order to organise as a community, it is necessary to choose a capable and sincere body or persons as the decision making authority and establish the zakat and waqaf, as the basis of our resources. Unfortunately some Muslim communities in the non-Muslim world forget the two principles easily and give in to the influence of alien ideologies and cultures. There is an absence of shura and an absence of viable resources, and therefore, these communities disintegrate. It is necessary for Muslim minorities to establish a nation-wide community organisation operating on a system of consultation sustained by a centralised fund.

16. We in Malaysia will continue to do everything within our means to assist in the struggle of the Muslim ummah wherever they are for their right to lead the life of a true Muslim. I am happy to note that RISEAP, the Malaysian Airline System and the Malaysian Pilgrims Management and Fund Board were able to make arrangements last year for over 150 Muslim pilgrims from countries where they are a minority to perform the Haj with facilities provided by the Board. They were from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and New Caledonia. I am glad that for the coming Haj season, about 200 pilgrims from Hong Kong, Macau, Korea, Japan and Taiwan are expected to perform the Haj under similar arrangements.

17. As I announced last year, an International Islamic University will, Insha-Allah, admit the first students in the Law, Economics and Business Studies Faculties in July this year. The cooperation of RISEAP in forwarding information of the establishment of this University and obtaining pre-enrolment information for 200 applicants from Muslims in the region, is greatly appreciated. Insha-Allah, the science faculties will commence next year.

18. The modern age presents us with a challenging opportunity to test our integrity, exploit our resources and call upon our moral strength. The contemporary scene facing Muslim minorities, and even some Muslim majorities, holds for us both the threat of extinction, as well as the promise of glory. The world is crying out for those who have the courage to stand out, to defy stereotypes and lend a helping hand to this troubled world. The Muslims can do it. In fact we must try because if we do, we will preserve our identity and help our troubled fellow man irrespective of their religious beliefs. Above all we will please Allah, enjoy His infinite blessings and guidance, and stand as the true symbol of humanity.

19. With this words, I have much pleasure in officially declaring RISEAP's Second General Assembly open.

Wabillahi taufik walhidayah, wassalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.