

THE RISEAP 9TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY/15TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
DYNASTY HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR, 6 SEPTEMBER 1996

I am honoured to be given this opportunity to address the General Assembly of the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP) again after a lapse of 10 years during which it had been held in several centres in the region - Kuching (1988), Sydney (1990), Singapore (1992) and Bangkok (1994). The decision to return to Kuala Lumpur after moving about the region is all the more significant because this biennial General Assembly coincides with the celebration of the 15th anniversary of the founding of RISEAP in Kuala Lumpur. In doing so let us remember that if it had not been for the vision and initiative of the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, RISEAP might not be around today. It was his idea that there should be an organisation to instil greater unity and foster effective cooperation among Muslim organisations and Muslim communities in this region, and especially to promote and protect the interests of the minorities. Today as we commemorate Tunku's great service to Islam and inter-religious tolerance let us pray to Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala to shower His blessings on his soul and reward him for all that he had done in the cause of Islam.

2. As we all know, in this region of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, only three countries have Muslim majorities i.e Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. In the other countries of the region, the Muslims form minority communities living under non-Muslim rule. In most of these countries, the Muslims have by and large integrated themselves into the local societies while maintaining their faith and identity as Muslims. They have also formed their own organisations not only to maintain contact among themselves but also to build mosques, schools and welfare institutions for the benefit of the Ummah. In some of these countries, the governments have been considerate and helpful towards the Muslims through providing land for building mosques and facilities for the teaching of religion to the children. It would seem that the only problems they have are with themselves. Divided along ethnic lines, they have yet to learn to live together and cooperate as true Muslims in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Much, of course, depends on the leadership of the community. If they can find people with the dedication and commitment to serve in the path of Allah free from other considerations, there will be greater unity and cooperation among the different communities which will make the unity of the Ummah a reality.

3. In the few countries where the governments previously restrict religious freedom we are glad to note that there are already signs of a change of policy on the part of the

governments concerned which hopefully will lead to a more liberal attitude over religious matters. Let us hope and pray that this change will not take too long to happen and that in the meantime, the Muslims in the countries concerned will prepare to rebuild their faith and the institutions underpinning them so that Islam can regain its rightful place in society.

4. Today, RISEAP has grown in strength, in terms not only of its membership but also in the resources that it can mobilise to support its programmes. There are now 50 Muslim organisations spread out in 18 countries of the region which are affiliated to RISEAP. What is interesting is that, among the new requests for affiliation, quite a few are from outside the region - Europe, America and Africa. While this may seem complimentary to RISEAP, the present constitution of RISEAP does not permit their admission. Nevertheless, it should be possible for RISEAP to enter into ties of friendship and cooperation based on the spirit of brotherhood of the Ummah, without formally admitting them as members. I think it would be wrong for RISEAP to take the attitude that because an organisation is from outside the region, therefore it cannot have any kind of relationship with it. As we all know, Islam transcends ethnic and geographical boundaries and all Muslims are brothers. As such, they should be willing always to cooperate whether during times of difficulties or when times are good. Such cooperation will strengthen them and enable them to face any crisis when it comes.

5. Thus, although Bosnia-Herzegovina is not in the Pacific region RISEAP did not hesitate to give a helping hand to the refugees seeking refuge in Malaysia. Together with other NGOs, RISEAP helped to provide not only support and shelter for them but also education for their children and jobs for the adults so that they could be self supporting. Later, it found itself having to provide basic teachings of Islam to the new converts from Africa and other countries in Europe. These people had come to Malaysia, because of the peace and harmony prevailing in the country. And when the Chechens were being slaughtered by superior Russian forces, RISEAP and other Muslim NGOs in Malaysia took a firm stand in demanding that the international community help stop the carnage and provide humanitarian assistance to the victims.

6. Today as RISEAP and its members commemorate its 15 years of existence, a new approach to dakwah is being launched. It is called Da'wah Bil Hal and it stresses on action - good deeds which anyone with the right attitude and inclination can do to help his immediate neighbours and fellow-men in times of distress or trouble. The objective is not proselytisation as much as it is to display the true teachings of Islam and its

practice. This will help to correct the wrong impression of Islam that prevails among non-Muslims in particular. Even Muslims are under the mistaken impression that their help and sympathy should be confined only to Muslims and that the distress and misfortunes of non-Muslims are not of concern to them. On the other hand, Muslims are not against receiving help and sympathy from non-Muslims. Indeed in many instances we find only non-Muslims are actively helping Muslim while Muslim apparently ignore the fate of their co-religionists.

7. All these do not help to give Islam and Muslims a good image. Muslims must know that it is their duty to help other Muslims and that the misfortunes of non-Muslims too should attract their sympathy and active help. While Da'wah Bil Hal may not be intended to proselytise, it should at least help to generate greater understanding and appreciation of Islam and what it means to be a Muslim.

8. Non-Muslim lack of understanding and sometimes outright antagonism towards Islam is not entirely due to their fault. We Muslims are often to be blamed.

. Once upon a time the Muslim Civilisation was highly respected. Muslims were economically wealthy and very learned in all fields, in the sciences and mathematics, in navigation and astronomy, in engineering and in construction. Muslim countries were united under one Khalifah and were powerful. They never foresook Islam even when they were successful, in other words they were as enjoined by the Quran equally attentive to the well-being in this world as they were to the next, to akhirat.

10. But then came those who preached exclusive dedication to akhirat. They even condemned this world as being created by Allah only for the infidels who they said would enjoy life in this world but will be damned in the hereafter. As this teaching spread Muslims began to lose interest in learning other than those subjects designated as religious. Over the centuries Muslims began to lose their skills and knowledge and eventually their strength. Today they are totally weak, dependent upon and often subservient to the big powers. Gone are the glorious days of the Muslim Empire, and with it the respect for Islam by the non-Muslims. Indeed some Muslims have also lost their faith in Islam.

11. If we wish the world, the Muslim Ummah and the human community to once again respect Islam and hold in high esteem its teachings, Muslim countries must recover their strength and their superiority in all fields, in modern knowledge, in administrative skills, in the conduct of their relation with themselves and with others, in industry and commerce. In other

words, they must be successful in this world as much as they believe they will in the next world. And I would like to repeat that this will be in accordance with the teachings of the Al Quran. Non-Muslims cannot be impressed by what we tell them will be our glorious life in the hereafter especially when they see us weak and cringing before the worldly powers, disunited, even fighting each other and generally not practising what we loudly proclaim to be the teachings of Islam.

12. The best form of Da'wah is to demonstrate through practice the goodness of Islam, the tolerance and sympathy for the less fortunate members of the Ummah and also those not of our faith, the peace and stability and consequently the prosperity of well administered Muslim nations. For the faithful the rewards and the punishments in the after life will be meaningful but it is too much to expect those who do not even believe in the afterlife to be awed by hell and heaven and to appreciate Islam because of it.

13. This is what is really meant by Da'wah Bil Hal. It is not just doing good deeds to others such as helping the poor, building schools and hospitals but it must also be the demonstration that Islam is actually not an obstacle to worldly progress, to skillful administration and to development, to the wealth generated by skills in industry and commerce and to the strength to defend those in need of help be they Muslim or not. The success of the Muslims and their nations will prove more convincing of the essential goodness of Islam than all the preaching about Islamic teachings and beliefs especially when Muslims often do not practise what they preach.

14. This emphasis on Da'wah Bil Hal has come at the right time. If Muslims believe that they can be as good as others in all fields and they set out to achieve this, then they will surely be able to bring a return of their past glory and greatness. And in doing so they will in fact be practising true Da'wah Bil Hal. Insya-Allah, if we Muslims are dedicated to explaining Islam in this easily understandable way, through deeds and demonstrable achievements, we will succeed in our mission. We will all be true missionaries, not just by calling upon all to do good and reject evil, but by actually doing good and rejecting evil ourselves.