

The Opening Of The 2nd Islamic Conference Of Tourism Ministers

Palace Of The Golden Horses, Kuala Lumpur 12 October 2001

On behalf of the Government and the people of Malaysia, I have great pleasure in extending a warm welcome to the delegates at the Second Islamic Conference of Tourism Ministers in Kuala Lumpur today. I am particularly honoured to be given the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering and to officially declare open the Second Islamic Conference of Tourism Ministers this morning.

2. The theme chosen for this conference "Tourism: A Smart Partnership for Solidarity and Prosperity" is very appropriate. As we are all aware, among the aims and objectives of this Conference is to promote tourism and its development within the member countries. But tourism can be more than just traveling to see interesting countries and people and generally enjoying ourselves. Tourism can also help foster good relationship between countries and people, reveal business opportunities, improve our knowledge about things in general and of course help grow the economy.

3. It seems that being a Muslim these days can be a constant cause of distress. Globally in the past decade or so, especially after the demise of Communism in 1990, Islam and Muslims have been portrayed as synonymous with terrorism, militancy, extremism and being anti-Western in the media of the West. With recent events every Muslim is suspected of being a potential terrorist. Anyone with a Muslim name, especially if it includes "bin", will be interrogated and searched at airports as a suspect terrorist. We admit that there are Muslim terrorists but there are also Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and atheistic terrorists. It is grossly unfair to treat every Muslim as a terrorist who must be interrogated and searched. It will only make Muslims resentful and probably become sympathetic towards those Muslims who chose terror to get their back on an unfriendly world.

4. If I may digress from focusing on tourism alone, I would like to state that terrorism is not the Muslim way. Despite the injustice of the treatment against us we must not resort to terrorism. It will only bring more misfortunes for Muslims. Instead we should all try to develop our countries and equip ourselves with all the knowledge, skills and capacities to enable us to protect ourselves independently of others. When we are strong the tendency to bully Muslims will cease. It may take us a long time, a century even to do this. But we as Muslims must "sabar", be patient. We were great before. There is no reason we cannot become great again. But when we become strong we must not do what we do not like others to do to us.

We must not seek revenge like the Jahiliah of pre-Islamic days. Instead we should use our strength to influence the shaping of a more just world. And so for the time being we have to endure the indignities, the humiliation and the oppression against us. As a result of the WTC attacks Muslims are finding life in Western countries and traveling there very difficult. We don't have to expose ourselves to this difficulty. There are countries, Muslim and non-Muslim where there is no discrimination against us. For the time being we should go there instead. When the furore has died down we can resume our old practices.

5. Traveling and touring is now a part of modern life. We travel more today because the jet-plane has made traveling no longer the privilege of a very few. Everyone can, with a small expenditure, travel to any part of the world, repeatedly even. As the world is shrinking and we are being forced into becoming close neighbours with all the people of the world, as borders can no longer isolate us, there is a real need for us to see and understand how other people live. Otherwise we would have a distorted view and bias against everyone except people of our own countries.

6. For Muslims getting to know other Muslims in other countries is almost a duty. We must admit that despite our religion enjoining us to be brothers, we are really not very close to each other. West Asia is geographically closer to Europe than Asia and most West Asians travel frequently, some almost every year to Europe. Many go to America to see the many wonders of that continent. Yet Asia, in particular Southeast Asia, has more Muslims than West Asia and Asia is not lacking in wonderful sights. Additionally the Muslim countries of Asia offer a life-style that is compatible and comfortable to Muslim visitors. The sights and sound of Malaysia for example are not too strange to Muslims from West Asia yet are sufficiently different to be interesting.

7. For Muslims in Southeast Asia, there is a fascination for the holy lands and holy places in West Asia. There are thousands of places which are historically linked to the early days of the spread of Islam which are of deep interest to Southeast Asian Muslims. For them it is like tracing the roots of their faith.

8. Of course there is the Haj which they are required to perform. But after performing the rituals of the Haj, their understanding and dedication to Islam would be enhanced if they can trace the footsteps of the Prophet, his companions and followers and the spread of Islam to the countries of West Asia and North Africa. In fact many Southeast Asians trace their ancestors to the Arabian Peninsulars, in particular

Hadramaut in Yemen. The yearning to go and see their ancestral homes and land is very great among Southeast Asians. Very often they would meet long lost relatives and members of their clans. Only good can come from rediscovering relatives and clans or tribal members, reestablishing relations, which in turn will result in those relatives and clan returning the visit.

9. Through these contacts there can be some new business generated which can contribute towards greater trade between the countries of West Asia, North Africa and Southeast Asia. This will enrich both the regions and enhance the development of the countries of both regions. Can there be any doubt that exchanges of visits between the followers of the same faith would contribute towards a greater sense of brotherhood and understanding between us? It would contribute so much to fulfilling the injunctions of our religion to acknowledge that there are different races of people in this world and that we have to know each other.

10. The first Arab travelers to Malaysia came in sailing boats which were so small that modern day travelers would never dream of trusting themselves to cross oceans in these crafts. Yet the intrepid sailors and traders of a thousand years ago dared to cross the vast oceans in order to trade and to spread the faith. We in Malaysia and Southeast Asia are forever grateful to them for they brought the light of Islam to us.

11. But today traveling over oceans is easy. We no longer use the big passenger ships which we use only a few decades ago. We travel by air in jet planes which take us only a few short hours to reach each other's country. The Arab traders of the past took months to reach Malaysia from the Arabian Peninsular. Some perish in the storms of the Indian Ocean. But in seven hours only can we cross the ocean regardless of the violent storm which raged in the sea below.

12. There should therefore be more travelers between our countries for business, social and pleasure. The contacts between us can reinforce the old relations. As Muslims we can develop brotherly relations, enhance our knowledge of Islam and achieve greater solidarity. Together we can recapture at least a part of the glory of the golden years of Islam.

13. We are living in tumultuous times. Great changes are taking place around us. These changes can do us a lot of good but they can also do us a great deal of harm. If we are weak the harm will be greater as we are forced to adjust and react rather than initiate things. Reacting to schemes and ideas devised by others for their own good cannot but be disadvantageous to us. What little competitive advantage we

have cannot be put to the best use. Indeed they may even become irrelevant or obstructive as ideas such as globalisation are formulated to give the others the best advantage.

14. Alone we are bound to go under. But together we may stand a chance. Before we can bolster each other we will have to know each other, and know each other better. Appreciating each other's problems, we will be able to cooperate better and will be able to protect our interest in the increasingly challenging world.

15. Clearly there is much good from traveling to other countries and places. For Muslims the need to know each other, to know the historical connection and linkages and to establish contact with Muslim brothers of different races makes traveling actually essential. Air travel has made traveling between distant countries possible and pleasant. And the speed of air travel makes repeated journeys in a lifetime convenient and affordable.

16. Ibn Batuta took a lifetime to travel some 17,000 miles from Africa to China, stopping in many places along the way. His modern counterpart will take just one day, traveling in comfort above the weather. In a lifetime we can make a hundred such journeys or more. If he learnt so much in the course of his travel, we can learn a hundred times more. And we can still contribute to the body of knowledge and understanding that Ibn Batuta initiated.

17. We are in the Information Age. Knowledge is what determines who progresses and who doesn't. Ibn Batuta was a great historical figure because of the knowledge he gained during his travels. The Islamic civilisation was the result of such men as this great traveler. We have a hundred times more opportunity and capacity to contribute to the Islamic Renaissance than these great people of the past. It would be wrong not to seize the opportunities coming our way.

18. As Ministers of Tourism in Islamic countries your task is clear. You have to encourage your people to travel, to visit Muslim countries which many Muslims know little about. In the process you are also going to contribute to the economic advancement of your countries.

19. Your conference should afford you with the knowledge, understanding and recognition of the role of tourism not just in business but in propagating the close relationship between brother Muslims. I am sure you will contribute greatly to this industry and to the greater understanding of the role of tourism in the development of our countries.

20. On that note I have pleasure in declaring open the Conference of Ministers of Tourism of the OIC countries.