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'Interaction among faiths crucial'

DPM Wong says increased religious fervour should not hinder open dialogue

By ZAKIR HUSSAIN

SINGAPOREANS are becoming more religious but should continue to engage in frank and open dialogue about their faiths, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng has said.

The message of tolerance, understanding and respect that comes through in such exchanges must also reach out to the grassroots, he said yesterday.

Mr Wong, who is Home Affairs Minister, was speaking at a forum at the National University of Singapore, organised by the University Scholars Programme, Ba'alwae Mosque and the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO).

The forum on religions and peaceful co-existence saw three experts - Buddhist leader Chin Kung, Jesuit priest Thomas Michel and Muslim academic Ibrahim Abu Rabi - speak to 450 participants about common values that faiths share and the role religious leaders can play.

Underlining the value of dialogue among the various faiths at the forum's opening, Mr Wong said Singapore recognised that maintaining religious harmony required constant communication and contact.

He noted that increased religious fervour - a trend noted by studies and media reports - may hamper interaction on the part of some people here.

"While spirituality is important, as Singaporeans become religious, they must continue to engage in frank and open inter-faith discussion. They should not perceive interaction with other religions as a compromise of their beliefs," he said.

And, despite examples of tension among followers of different religions abroad, he reminded his audience that world religions in fact "share many common grounds that have, regrettably, not been given enough emphasis and attention".

"Religious leaders should underline these shared values," he said, citing compassion, charity, peace and respect for humanity as examples.

This is not the first time the Government has stressed the importance of inter-faith dialogue.

In November, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, on a visit to the Vatican, broached the idea of Singapore

as a venue for a meeting that would bring religious leaders together to promote greater understanding of each other's faith.

Mr Wong yesterday provided an update on the state of inter-faith ties here, saying a recent study by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports showed the vast majority of respondents were satisfied with the state of inter-racial and inter-religious ties, and were optimistic about future relations.

But he said this situation should not be taken for granted, as tensions abroad could easily strain ties here.

Mr Wong commended the IRO and religious leaders for their efforts to promote peace and shape "rational and responsible" reactions to recent controversies abroad.

Religion and beliefs are sensitive issues, he said, noting that misunderstandings do arise:

"Now and then, we get complaints of insensitive proselytising, of quarrels among neighbours over religious practices, and of denigration and insult of other religions, including over the Internet. These minor sensitivities and problems can be amplified when there is a lack of communication, understanding and tolerance among the different faiths."

The forum, he added, was in line with the spirit of the Community Engagement Programme launched to encourage community and religious leaders to take up the responsibility of building social resilience.

Other conferences could be held, perhaps with the IRO and Inter-Racial Confidence Circles in constituencies, he said.

Forum convenor Syed Farid Alatas said religious leaders had a role in ensuring the success of these efforts. Said the NUS sociology academic: "Such dialogue will not be effective so long as religious leaders involved do not take the dialogue to their respective congregations."

Mr Wong said successful dialogue hinged on Singaporeans recognising their common humanity and identity as citizens here.

He added: "I hope there will come a day when we can openly and sensitively discuss our theological differences, and at the same time, continue to celebrate our commonalities and unity in a peaceful, harmonious and joyous way as we are doing now."

Also speaking at a separate event last night was Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who said dialogue and engagement were crucial to root out stereotypes and prejudices that form faultlines in a multiracial society.

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GIVE AND TAKE AMONG FAITHS NEEDED TO MAINTAIN TRUST: PM, HOME M4



PHOTO: AFP

RELATIVES' DISTRESS: Family members wait for news of their loved ones at Surabaya airport in East Java yesterday. A reported 12 people survived the crash, bringing anguish and hope to relatives.

Confusion over fate of missing Indonesian plane

By DEVI ASMARANI
Indonesia Correspondent
IN JAKARTA

CONFUSION reigned yesterday over the fate of 102 people aboard an Indonesian passenger plane that went missing while on a flight from Java to Sulawesi, the latest in a string of transport tragedies for the country in the past week.

Officials had initially claimed that the wreckage of the Adam Air Boeing 737-400 had been spotted high on a mountain in southern Sulawesi and that 12 people aboard the plane had miraculously survived a crash.

They were said to have been picked up by villagers. Hours later, however, officials denied the claims.

"Up to now, we do not know the whereabouts of the plane," Regional Military Commander for Sulawesi, Major-General Arif Budi Sampoerno said on the 6.30pm news on ANTV.

"My team has gone to the field where the plane was said to have been found, but they did not find anything," he said.

He said the local village head, from whom the earlier report supposedly originated, denied having made it.

Mr Bambang Karnoyudo, head of the National Search and Rescue Agency, said a local police chief had filed the erroneous report after speaking to the village chief.

Descriptions of the crash site were vivid, with officials saying 90 corpses and debris from the plane were scattered over a 300m area of forest and jagged cliffs, and that a dozen people may have survived - bringing anguish and hope to waiting relatives.

"Once he went to check for himself he found it was not true," Mr Karnoyudo said, referring to the local police chief.

He also disclosed that search teams today would start scanning the seas off west Sulawesi for the plane.

He said the last signal from the plane, detected by a Singapore satellite, indicated it was in the water 30km north-west of Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi province.

"We will focus our search in that area in the sea and we will try our best to find survivors," he said.

The missing jetliner had 96 passengers, including three Americans and 11 children, and six crew on board.

The case of the missing airliner follows weeks of seasonal rains and high winds in Indonesia that have caused deadly floods, landslides and maritime accidents, including the sinking of a ferry in the Java Sea late on Friday which killed or left missing about 400 people. Another two ferries have also sunk in the past week.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono yesterday singled out bad weather for the cause of transportation accidents.

"I enter this year with mixed feelings," he said, at the opening of the stock exchange for the first day of this year's trading.

"On the one hand, we have good progress, but on the other hand, we have these latest accidents. Even though they are mostly caused by unfriendly weather phenomena, we still have to be alert (to weather conditions)," he said.

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Bringing faiths together

DPM Wong cited some examples of how groups came together to promote understanding:

- » The Ba'alwae Mosque and IRO got religious leaders to gather in August to pray for peace following the Israel-Lebanon conflict.
- » Catholic and Muslim leaders clarified positions to help head off potential misunderstanding in the wake of protests abroad after the Pope quoted a Byzantine emperor who linked Islam with violence.
- » Muslim group Ain Society and Christian group Hope Worldwide held joint projects in August to help the needy in their communities.
- » The Islamic Religious Council opened a Harmony Centre at Bishan's An-Nahdha Mosque in October to strengthen ties among groups of different faiths.