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Release No.: 27/AUGUST

07-1/92/08/15

92 - Am - 12

SPEECH BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT  
AND MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS  
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF CONFERENCE OF RELIGIOUS  
SCHOLARS  
ON 15 AUGUST 1992 AT ISLAMIC CENTRE OF SINGAPORE AT 9 AM

Let me first congratulate MUIS and PERGAS for jointly organising this Conference of Religious Scholars. I feel that the Conference is timely as it would enable the participants to discuss current issues facing all Muslims in Singapore. As a consequence, such deliberations would assist us in our effort to forge a more dynamic and progressive Muslim society here.

Islam defines a progressive society as one which is pragmatic and down to earth. It is a society whose members are

not only subservient to Allah, but who also discharge their duties and responsibilities to the best of their ability. Its members are conscientious, honest, compassionate, law-abiding and adhere strictly to the norms of behaviour set by the religion. The key which will open the door towards attaining these goals is the acquisition of knowledge.

The question is -- Is a progressive society as defined by Islam utopian and unattainable? The answer obviously is "No". A look at history will show that Islam did have a glorious past, especially during the times of the Prophet and subsequently the rule of the 4 Caliphs. They were great leaders, fine warriors, learned scholars and ardent believers of the faith. This belief and conviction

enabled them to successfully spread Islam to all corners of the globe. Vast areas of land were conquered and an Islamic Empire was created. The scholars actively pursued the acquisition of knowledge, expounding of Islamic theories, scientific researches etc. Muslims earned respect from others and honour for themselves.

But all this was in the past. Admittedly, today Muslims are not as great as their glorious ancestors. But the picture is not one of total gloom. A renewed commitment to the tenets of Islam and active pursuit of its goals can once again bring back a progressive society. This is because Islam is a way of life which places maximum emphasis on knowledge and learning. Allah has blessed

man with the five senses and man is expected to use these senses for his own benefit and well-being. It is his bounden duty to make this earth of Allah a prosperous place. To do so, he has to constantly seek out and acquire

- knowledge. This is even more critical in today's context, for the world is moving ahead rapidly in science and technology and complacency will inevitably leave Muslims far behind the rest of the world.

- It may please you to note that Muslims in Singapore are increasingly placing emphasis on a sound education for their children -- not only in the arts and sciences but also in religion and ethics. Both are equally important. While a good academic education will prepare our

children for well paid jobs, a sound knowledge of religion and ethics will enable them to successfully ward off the social ills that go with a materialistic world. Only when we have acquired both can we claim to be truly educated.

Much has been done in the academic area. Muslim organisations like MENDAKI or the Council for the Development of Singapore Muslim Community are in the forefront of education, constantly coming up with projects to help more Muslim children improve their performance in schools, junior colleges and universities. Muslim children are being given incentives by way of scholarships, bursaries, interest-free loans, tuition classes, and counselling

services. But all this is of little use unless our children are prepared to take full advantage of all the assistance given by working hard to improve themselves. They must realise that opportunity knocks on one's door but once and they must seize it. Their parents must also chip in by constantly guiding them and supervising their work.

Our madrasahs can play a significant role in our effort to forge a progressive Islamic society. They provide the facilities for our children to acquire a sound grounding in Islamic education, thus facilitating a more balanced education for them. The madrasahs have demonstrated that they are equal to the challenges facing society. The on-going upgrading

courses for asatizahs will enable them to use the latest teaching techniques.

However, despite all the effort put in, we still have in our midst deviant youths who indulge in anti-social activities. Therefore much more needs to be done. We cannot afford to slacken. As we move forward, new challenges will have to be faced. These may encroach on religious sensitivities, necessitating religious rulings. But Islam must move on.

Our scholars must find solutions to the challenges ahead. This conference, bringing together all asatizahs, Islamic scholars, religious activists and leaders, is therefore most timely. I am confident that it will be able to :

a discuss strategies and plan of



action towards upgrading dakwah activities in the face of the challenges of the modern world today and the years ahead while

at the same time find solutions to the moral problems amongst some of our youths.

b explore the possibilities for our scholars to have a platform to express profoundly their views on religious issues which may emerge from time to time.

c discuss ways to upgrade the economic status of our asatizahs.

In conclusion, I would like to

thank the organisers for inviting me to officially open this conference. I wish one and all a very fruitful session.

In the Name of Allah the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful, I declare this Conference open.

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From: INFORMATION5 (8812:GVT224)  
Subject: [conf religious scholars]  
Posted: Sat 15-August-92 18:07 SING  
Delivered: Sat 15-August-92 18:07 SING (37 lines)  
Msg ID: IPM-8812-920815-163141940

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