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MC/NOV/44/79 (Social Affairs)

ADDRESS BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, ACTING MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS, AT THE "AWAL MUHARRAM" CEREMONY ORGANISED BY THE MUSLIM RELIGIOUS COUNCIL OF SINGAPORE (MUIS), AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE ON THURSDAY, 22 NOV 79 AT 2000 HOURS

Some festivals are celebrated in a joyous - even riotous - way. Others which are founded on a religious event tend to be more decorous and are usually spent in prayers, fasting and penance.

Muharram, the first month of the Muslim calendar commemorates the Hijrah, the emigration of Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers from Mecca to Medina. For Muslims, it is taken as the founding of Islam. For after this it spread with remarkable rapidity to the four corners of the world. Unlike the celebrations associated with most other new years, Muharram is regarded as one of Islam's sacred festivals.

This year's Muharram may be of even more significance. Fourteen centuries have rolled by since the historic trek of our Prophet Muhammad. To-day marks the beginning of the 15th century of Islam.

The world of today is very different from the world in which the Prophet lived in. It may be difficult in some questions to reconcile between the codes of conduct which had application to the particular conditions of times long past against the realities of living in present day society and conditions.

The Malays in Singapore face the same problems, no less. As a minority race it is faced, on one hand, with maintaining its identity, remaining faithful to Islamic religious practices and retaining its own customs. On the other hand, it must be able to progress in competition with other members of the community while at the same time to live in harmony with those of other races and who profess different religious faith.

In Singapore, it is essential that this harmony is maintained. There is a conscious effort to ensure that minority groups will not be at

a disadvantage. A Presidential Council acts as a watch-dog to see that there is no infringement of minority rights by any law passed by Parliament. There is no discrimination by race, colour or creed. Competition is on equal terms, and advancement is on individual merit.

Singapore is a secular state. Nevertheless, freedom of worship is enshrined in its constitution. To advise the government on the Muslim religion and to regulate on Muslim affairs, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) was constituted in 1966. This Muslim Council is the successor of the Muslim and Hindu Endowments Board and the Muslim Advisory Board, originally named the Mohammedan Advisory Board, established in 1915. The Syariah Court was set up in 1959 to deal with disputes relating to Muslim marriage and divorce.

More than merely setting up the form under which Muslim matters are dealt with, Government has found positive ways to promote the interests of Muslims in Singapore. Some of them may be cited. A Muslim Women's Welfare Home which began through the efforts of the Muslim Advisory Board was taken over and run as a home by the Social Welfare Department. Government also helped Muslimic Trust Fund Association to build the Darul Ihsan Muslim Orphanage. The latest is the assistance given to MUIS in the administration, collection and advance of funds for the building of new mosques in Singapore. About \$4.6 million has already been spent to build three mosques, and a further \$5.7 million will be required from contributions from the Muslim community to complete the next three mosques in the first phase of the Mosque Building Programme of the MUIS.

The function of Muslim scholars who have given a life-time to study the sacred literature, who understand the historical and social context of these writings and the changes that have taken place is accordingly of importance in explaining and interpreting the teachings of Islam. It is important that there is guidance on what are the fundamental principles of Islam as against the rules which have to be worked out based on these principles to regulate the conduct and practices to suit local conditions. I am happy that we have two eminent scholars in the persons of Mr Mohammad Quraish Shihab and Dr Zakia Daradjat. I am glad that the MUIS has recognised the need, and taken the initiative, to invite them to Singapore. I am sure that all Muslims in Singapore will benefit from their teachings.

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