

ISLAMIC UNITY

That problem of ego & indifference

Tunku Abdur Rahman Putra, Secretary-General, Islamic Secretariat speaking to *IMPACT*

Shall we start with quoting from your own speech, the speech you made on the occasion of Islamic Centres' Conference in Rabat earlier in June this year? At that meeting you had very frankly pointed out some of the things which had been impeding the setting up and the functioning of the Islamic Secretariat. There was an evident lack of interest and support on the part of the member States. How does the situation stand now? Has it been possible to make a go of what they together undertook in the name of Islam?

We have not made much progress because we have not been able to hold our Foreign Ministers' conference in Kabul. The Conference was originally fixed to meet in Kabul, but because of the famine which Kabul faced and other troubles, they asked if we could find another place. I persuaded the Saudi Arabian Government to hold the conference in Jeddah and they accepted. But now when the Prime Minister of Malaysia went to the United Nations, it appeared the Afghan Foreign Minister approached him and asked to hold the conference in Kabul in April. I immediately wired back the Kabul Government, asking them to write officially to me if they really are serious about holding the conference. But to date I have not received any letter or request. This is the position.

Until and unless they agree to write to me officially the conference is to be held in Jeddah. It goes on like that. We shuttle from one place to another. So you can see that they are not all that serious and with every delay in holding this conference we slip back instead of going forward. This is where I say we have not made much progress. The mentality of the Islamic States is like that. They do not take this business of Muslim Unity seriously. When we have conference, they talk, they show enthusiasm but immediately after the conference they forget all about it. Another thing which is worrying me a lot is that they never reply to my letters. You write, you send telegram, you enclose an acknowledgement slip saying "we have received your letter", they never even sign it. There are, however, few countries which have shown keen enthusiasm like Iran and Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia. They show a great enthusiasm for the establishment of Islamic Unity, in Muslim brotherhood. Pakistan has had a lot of trouble of her own and I do not blame them if they do not respond quite so well. They did hold the conference in Karachi. That shows they are also very interested. They have had a lot of trouble and they can be forgiven, but other countries are not taking the least interest. They just join because they happen to be Muslim.

It is very frustrating because I am not a young man, and every year that passes I get older. I have taken up the responsibility for a period of two years hoping to be able to organise things. Having organised it I would like somebody else to come and run it, I have to have a little rest after many many years of work. This is my ambition, but until they can show responsiveness, more interest and appreciate the reason for the unity of Islam, I think the progress would be inevitably slow.

Finance is another problem. We have agreed on a budget, but until the Foreign Ministers meet, we cannot get the money. All the money we have so far received is only advances. Some countries have made very very generous advances. My own country has made an advance of 200,000 Malaysian Dollars i.e. about 70,000 US Dollars, Iran has paid 45,000 and Saudi Arabia has paid \$35,000. A few other countries like Pakistan advanced \$10,000 and provided money for the conference in Karachi. This has enabled us to carry on, but only just. One is not able to do very much, not even employ a number of people we want to employ. Thus the Secretariat is understaffed and not well established. This cannot be improved until a constitution has been adopted. The constitution has not been adopted because of a delay in the meeting of Foreign Ministers which should have been held in September.

Progress on the projects decided in Karachi?

The Islamic Bank too has made no progress. It is a very important project. Many Islamic countries have got funds and they could do a lot to help others who are less fortunate through the Bank and they can't lose. They get back their money and more. Egypt agreed to hold the Banking Conference in Cairo and then they failed to hold it so far. When we came near holding the conference in Kabul last September, they said, now it was too late. After the Kabul Conference was postponed I told them: "You have time now, please hold the conference, but there was no reply." I wrote again: "Allright, since you do not reply to my letters I will have to hold the conference elsewhere. Do you have any objection." There is no reply. That is the position.

However, we have been able to start work on the Islamic News Agency. It is headquartered in Beirut. The Malaysian Government have been kind enough to advance money for the purpose. Tun Mustapha, a Malaysian philanthropist has also paid 50,000 Malaysian Dollars to make alterations and furnish the headquarters building. We are faced with a Press War. They intend to kill us by the "black-out" of all of our activities. So we have got to fight this.



Looking back and facing the realities which you have just mentioned, can one say that the idea of Islamic Unity in the sense of "an Islamic block within the Community of nations (which) can by getting together, thinking together and working together contribute to the fullest advantage to the development of more stable and peaceful world order" . . . now how-so-much romantic and desirable this may sound, given the present state of the Muslim World, the whole idea looks rather impracticable? Would you agree to that?

I won't go so far as to say that the idea of Islamic Unity is impracticable. Something has started. The problem of Muslim disunity has its own historical roots. This has been an endemic problem. I may be wrong, but I have never heard some of the Arab States saying "we are Muslims". I have heard it in Pakistan, I have heard it in Malaysia, I have heard it in other countries, but never in these countries. All this is taken for granted. And now after all these years we are starting something new, so you must expect troubles, difficulties, obstructions and many other things. Each one wants to be on the top, each one wants to be the leader. They are very individualistic and they are all very sensitive about their own positions, their own-selves. That is what is holding back the progress. Their self-importance is very important, that is the truth. If they put religion over and above all these little things they can make Islam and Islamic Unity a reality, and it will be an important force in World Affairs.

How do you proceed towards being an important block when you have not succeeded in establishing even a Secretariat?

Yes, but as I say, we have only just started. I am giving all my time for this very purpose. I am not paid, I am not receiving any

salary because if I take salary I would not be able to pay anybody else. I am doing it out of love for my religion. I have done my service for myself, I have done my service for my people and my country, and I want to do it for my God before I die. That is why I have taken on the job as Secretary-General. I have given my time for the work, though I have got my home, my family, my friends and my comfort in Malaysia. I am a man who needs to rest after my retirement but I have given up all that to come to Jeddah and serve my religion. If others can appreciate that and give only half per cent of what I have given, my efforts will be successful. Whether I succeed or not I do not know. I can only pray that we succeed. Whether it is going to be a success during my lifetime or not I do not know. I can give only so much to it, and I cannot do much more because I am not well too, and I am not young. But if we get the money, we can pay somebody else to do it. I say this truthfully and God is my witness.

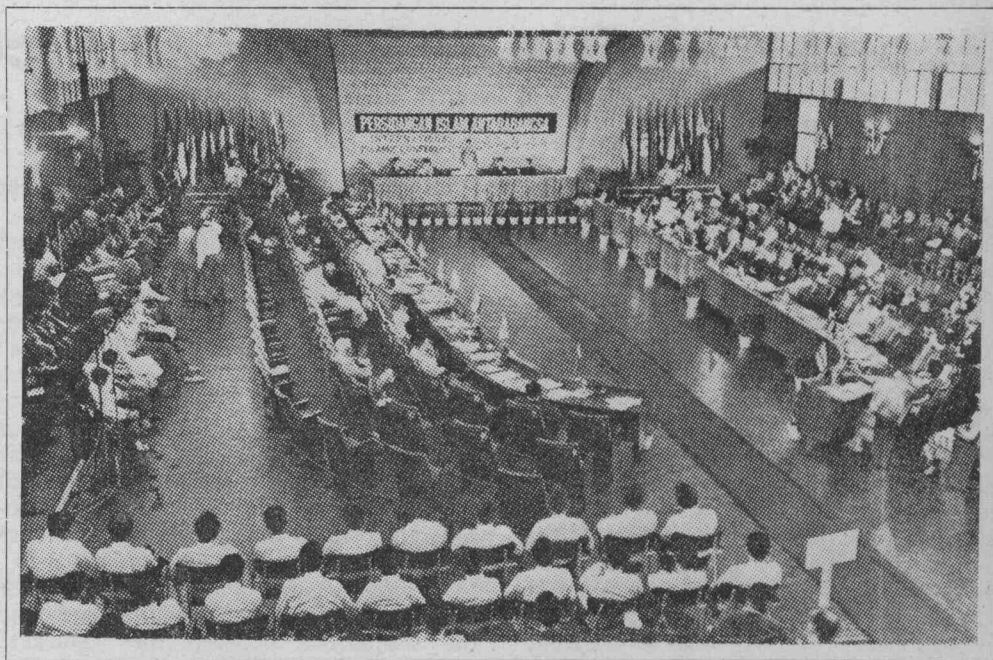
Don't you need to do more groundwork before thinking of achieving any purposeful unity—unity which is more real than merely demonstrative?

There is plenty of groundwork that has been done. One of the things that I have in mind, which has been approved by the conference in Karachi, is that we should have three deputy secretary-generals. These three deputies are not supposed to warm the seats there. They will go and visit the countries. Each will have his own departmental portfolio and projects to execute. They will visit the countries, hold seminars, hold conferences, hold discussions, work on the ground and get everything going. But we cannot employ these men now because we haven't got the money.

If they all pay money no doubt we will succeed, but we cannot proceed without money. I hope that they will give some thought to the need for the Muslim countries to unify in the form of a commonwealth. Once we got our formula all worked out, if only we got the money we could do it . . . I am not that much discouraged. Sometimes frustrated, yes but I am not disappointed. I have gone so far and I am prepared to see it through.

When you accepted this commission to be the Secretary-General what specific ideas and plans you had in your mind?

When I came to attend the meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers in 1959, about the Eid period, I went to pray at the Woking Mosque. When they saw me there, they asked me to address the congregation. I was not prepared to address the congregation, but the idea came to me all of a sudden. I said: "How nice it would be if we were to have a commonwealth of Islamic nations, to do good for one another, to help one another and to co-operate with one another for the good of all". Then having said that I allowed it up by sending delegation to all



INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC CONFERENCE IN KUALA LUMPUR

the countries under the leadership of one civil servant called Rajah Omar. He came back. There was no response. Then few years afterwards I decided to hold in my own country a conference of Muslim nations. So I held one in Kuala Lumpur. That was in 1968. They all came. They were so impressed with the way we held the conference and took the decisions. They were all inspired by what went on. After the Aqsa arson a meeting was held in Rabat in September 1969. When the head of the Islamic States met there, they decided to set up an Islamic Secretariat in Jeddah or in Jerusalem. But before we proceed to Jerusalem we must make a success of it in Jeddah. Sometimes they are very apprehensive that their position might be compromised. They are so over-obsessed of their dignity and self-importance that it will be difficult to bring them together and work together to achieve a common goal.

At the moment it would appear that they have not got the Islamic spirit so well expressed in the past. They have not got the enthusiasm of our great great forefathers who almost took the world. We have lost that spirit. That is why we suffer indignities and humiliation. We only talk, we pay lip-service, but do nothing really of worth in the name of our religion. I hope that sometime they will come to realise this.

The other countries of the world when they face problems they get together, work together. Even Britain is trying to enter the Common Market, but the Muslim countries do not regard themselves as Muslim countries. They consider themselves just like any other country. We in Malaysia, for instance, after independence realised that we have got to work with

other nations for self-preservation, for self-interest. We formed ASEAN, we helped to form ASPAC.

There has to be an urge and awakening in the hearts of the Islamic countries that we should get together because only by coming together we can do a lot that we can not do alone. Take for instance, the project for the development bank. There is plenty of money in the Islamic countries but they do not know what to do with it. This money can be used to develop the poorer Muslim countries and help them. On the political plane we have got to work as a block. It would be a very very strong block. In the defence and other spheres too we have to come together. The 3 million Jews, for instance, are able to keep out 100 million Arabs because of their unity. It is not the 3 million in Israel who are fighting, it is all the Jews of the world. We stand a chance only if we can get the whole Muslim world to come together. But the Arabs are divided amongst themselves; how can they hope to get support from other Muslim nations. This is very important. If we have any regard and love for the Holy Prophet, our God, our religion, then I think we must get together. If we do not think that way, then we just have to suffer more humiliations.

Still, we have got to work under these circumstances. I have done my duty and shall continue to do whatever I can.

So you are still optimistic?

I cannot say if I am optimistic but I am hopeful. I am a Muslim and I am grateful for the mercies I receive from God, but I cannot go on like this. If I do not receive support from the Muslim nations, what good can I do?