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WATER RESOURCES AND MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS
AT THE MUIS WORKPLAN SEMINAR ON SATURDAY, 10 APRIL 2010, 9.45 AM**

Council and Staff of MUIS

Religious and Mosque Leaders

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to join you at the MUIS Work Plan Seminar 2010 this morning. As a progressive Muslim community, we live and work with fellow Singaporeans of many races and religions to create a nation-state that is admired across the world.

2. MUIS will unveil its Third 3-Year Plan today. Since 2004, the 3-year plan cycle has helped MUIS prioritize and implement many programmes that build on the achievements of the past. These programmes have benefitted the Singapore Muslim community in particular, and the nation at large. Allow me to highlight some key developments with MUIS having completed two 3-year plans.

Leading Religious Thinking

3. One key area is that of religious thinking. In this age of globalization, rapid development and constant changes, we come across questions that may not have answers suitable for this age. MUIS has responded to such complex issues by reflecting deeply on the values and principles of Islam found in our religious texts in order to provide clear religious guidance for the community. For example, the Fatwa Committee reflected on the Muslim value of compassion and the pressing need to save lives when coming up with the fatwa on organ donation.

The Committee also reflected on values behind Islamic inheritance and the Singapore context when it updated a fatwa on Joint Tenancy to provide flexibility to Muslims to meet both civil and religious requirements.

4. In relation to this, it is worth noting that Muslim scholars worldwide have begun to deepen understanding of our religious texts by analyzing them in the appropriate context. A recent example is the study of the fatwa by Ibn Taimiyya, a renowned 14th century Muslim jurist and theologian, by a group of Muslim scholars meeting in Mardin, Turkey. The scholars analyzed Ibn Taimiyya's fatwa and took into context the fact that the fatwa was written in the aftermath of the Crusades and during a time when Muslim lands were being frequently raided by the Mongols. The scholars reasoned that, in today's context, the emergence of civil states that guard religious, ethnic, and national rights "has necessitated declaring the entire world a place of tolerance and peaceful co-existence between all religious groups and factions". This example underlines the importance of being progressive in our religious outlook. MUIS will continue to review and update our religious thinking to help our community progress while being rooted in the values and principles of Islam.

5. To remain at the helm of progressive religious thinking, we have to be willing to learn from others and to share with others what we have learnt. We have been fortunate in recent years to hear from scholars through efforts like the MUIS Lectures. One recent example is the hosting of Sheikh Dr Ahmad Bader-Eddin Hassoun, the Grand Mufti of Syria. Invited under the MUIS' Distinguished Visitor Programme, Sheikh Hassoun delivered a lecture on "Islam's Enduring Values for Humanity". His lecture expounded on the universal values of Islam and the importance of embracing religious diversity and different schools of thought. There is much that we can learn and understand from such learned speakers. We were also fortunate to have had Allahyarham the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar as our first MUIS Distinguished Visitor. Dr Syed Muhammad Tantawi was widely respected across the world, and loved by many thousands of Al-Azhar graduates. I have met his successor, Dr El Tayyeb, when I visited Egypt in May 2005. I am confident he will provide inspiring leadership to the institution of Al-Azhar.

6. We were also fortunate to have hosted the learned Archbishop of Canterbury and heard renowned historians and scholars like Karen Armstrong and Tariq Ramadan. Our continued engagement of such scholars gives us more perspectives and bodes well for developing our own religious and social thinking.

7. At the same time, we have also had the opportunity to host religious leaders and delegations from the region and elsewhere who have been keen to hear about our thinking, systems and processes. And it is heart-warming indeed to see their pride and happiness in meeting Singaporean Muslims and to hear from them that we have established ourselves as a progressive society even though we may be a small nation. To follow our beloved Prophet's tradition, we must continue to learn from all sources as long as we share common values; and also be willing to share what we have learned so that humanity progresses.

Nurturing our Religious Leaders

8. This leads me to the second point – nurturing our religious leaders. Our Ulama and Asatizah play a significant role in shaping our religious lives. And MUIS supports their desire to continually seek to improve themselves. Initiatives like the Asatizah Recognition Scheme and the Asatizah Executive Development Programme have helped recognize and further develop their knowledge and skills. 330 Asatizah have completed the Executive Development programme.

9. I am happy to note that 27 Asatizah have completed their Masters in fields such as Education, Counselling and Islamic Studies. We have Ustaz Jakfar Embek who has completed a Master's programme with Gloucester University, and Ustaz Irwan Hadi who has been awarded the Chevening Scholarship to pursue a Master of Laws (LLM) at University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Another example is Ustaz Leyaket Ali Bin Omar who is pursuing a Ph.D in Inter-Religious Studies at the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies in Yogyakarta, a programme jointly offered by three Universities (Gadjah Mada University, Duta Wacana Catholic University, UIN Sunan Kalijaga). Our Asatizah have done well and we hope that they will continue to develop themselves further.

Commitment to Religious Education

10. Thirdly, we have revised our religious education system to keep it up-to-date and relevant to the needs of the community in a changing global landscape. We have 35 part-time Madrasahs that offer our a.L.I.V.E. curriculum and 6 full-time Madrasahs to provide for future religious leaders.

11. MUIS has had a holistic approach to the development of our 6 full-time Madrasahs. For example, MUIS disbursed \$500,000 to the Madrasahs as part of a special grant to assist them in PSLE preparations. A key achievement for the Madrasah sector is the rollout of the Joint Madrasah System or JMS. Currently involving three Madrasahs, the JMS provides students with a consolidated and streamlined curriculum that is able to offer multiple academic options – namely the religious (ukhrawi), hybrid and academic tracks. It bodes well not just for the students but for the community as a whole as we look into how we manage our limited talent pool. We must ensure that our young graduates are able to secure fulfilling work that helps them raise families and contribute to society.. And as we move forward, we must ensure that community funding to Madrasahs is focused more towards meeting the religious needs of our community.

Imparting Compassion and Giving Charity

12. Fourthly, MUIS has channeled our compassion in a way that would most benefit the needy. As Muslims, we have a duty to give charity and assist those who need our help. Over the years, we have set up a good framework that manages the collection of Zakat efficiently, and also distributes the funds effectively. In 2009, the amount collected for Zakat was \$21.3 million, an increase of \$1.3 million from 2008. In fact, Zakat collection has recorded an increasing trend since 2001. This reflects well on the community's spirit of giving.

13. It is not good enough to just collect and give away money. In order to empower families in need beyond simply providing them with financial assistance, MUIS introduced the Empowerment Partnership Scheme (EPS) in July 2004 to help needy Muslim families become self-reliant. Since then, MUIS has provided \$2.9 million on 610 families. Out of this, 403 families have successfully graduated from the EPS and MUIS' financial assistance schemes. Last year, 172 out of 210 families were empowered through the scheme. MUIS had also increased the annual training and education grants from \$2,000 to \$3,000 per family to empower them through skills upgrading.

Evolving Face and Functions of Mosques

14. My fifth point is the evolving face and functions of our mosques in meeting the needs of our community. Our mosques are centres for our religious life and we are fortunate to have the Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund (MBMF). Through the Central Provident Fund (CPF) mechanism, working Muslims have contributed small but significant sums every month. These have been pooled together to build mosques that have become the pride of our community and nation.

15. Since 1975, the community has raised more than \$135 million to build 23 mosques through MBMF. We amended AMLA in 2008 to allow the use of MBMF funds for mosque upgrading. MUIS has carefully prioritized the use of MBMF to co-fund five projects under the Mosque Upgrading Programme over five years at the cost of \$14.5 million including \$2 million for the first mosque to benefit - Masjid Muhajirin.

16. And from simply being a place of worship, the mosque has evolved to be a centre for religious education and social development assistance. It also engages our youth and families. With MUIS' assistance, 31 mosques have created family prayer rooms and special spaces for youth activities. On top of this, our mosques also create opportunities to strengthen inter-faith relations.

17. I wholeheartedly thank mosque leaders and volunteers for sharing MUIS's vision of mosques that meet the needs of our community and that are also linked up to like-minded partners beyond the community so that we benefit Singapore as a whole.

Meeting the Community's Religious Needs

18. Sixthly and finally, MUIS has provided important services like Haj, Halal and Korban in a professional and efficient manner. MUIS administers and regulates Halal certification in Singapore; facilitates the framework for our annual Haj pilgrimage; and manages the logistics for our Korban rites. These are necessary structures that require much thought, planning and follow-through behind the scenes. They also require managing unexpected factors that are beyond our control as in last year's Haj when there was a delay in receiving news of our enhanced quota. So, we must be grateful to all the various experts, committees, partners and volunteers involved, and also the jemaah for their patience and understanding.

MUIS' Third 3 Year Plan

19. The last two MUIS 3 year plans have therefore contributed much to the community's progress in key areas of our religious life, especially following a trying period when Muslim communities all over the world were under the spotlight. Going forward to the next 3-year plan, MUIS and the Community must look at how these efforts can be consolidated and further advanced.

20. So, MUIS will adopt a holistic and integrated approach to its core areas of work in the third 3 year plan. **The first key thrust is the development of religious content and thinking that is relevant to Singapore's context.** Such content will reinforce and support MUIS' core programmes and initiatives.

21. To nurture religious thinking to the next level, MUIS has started work to enhance the religious education curriculum to encourage our students to think deeply and critically when applying their knowledge to issues and developments of the modern world. The traditional sciences will be enriched by the introduction of new areas of knowledge like history of Islamic intellectual tradition, basic philosophy, introduction to western civilization and discussions on current global issues like poverty, degradation of the environment, status of women, world peace, sustainable human development, and ageing society. There will also be discussions on contemporary issues and how these relate to Islam.

22. MUIS will also embark on a study to better understand the many different aspects of religious life here in Singapore. The study aims to derive a better appreciation of our community's understanding and practice of Islam. Findings from this study will help MUIS review and improve its Islamic education and propagation of religious knowledge to the community.

23. MUIS will work to develop the community's religious life with focus on the need to be inclusive and the need to embrace diversity. This will be done through khutbah, adult Islamic education, mosque lectures and public discourse. To facilitate the community's growing interest in interfaith engagement, the Harmony Centre will spearhead new initiatives and programmes and engage Asatizah to discuss and enhance the community's understanding on the inter-faith traditions of Islam.

24. **The second key thrust for the next 3 years is to develop leaders who will enable and facilitate the progress of our community.** As part of this thrust, MUIS will launch the Asatizah Immersion Programme where young religious graduates and mosque religious officers will undergo a 6-month attachment at MUIS to broaden their perspective and build up their competencies in research.

25. MUIS will also focus on strengthening the capabilities of our religious teachers. Professional training for all Madrasah teachers will be completed by 2011 and MUIS will embark on a new “Leaders in Madrasah Education” programme. This is a collaboration with NIE to provide an active educational leadership programme for Madrasah teachers who are on the leadership track. aLIVE teachers will also undergo teacher training programmes that will help them better understand and deliver the new curriculum.

26. To engage youths in tertiary institutions, a new “Youth aLIVE Plus” programme will be introduced that will lead them through discourses and discussions to further understanding of key religious issues and concepts.

27. **MUIS’ third key thrust is to strengthen the platforms that reach out to the community.** Mosques have been important institutions serving the many aspirations of our community. They are well-integrated into the national social assistance fabric, and work in tandem with CDCs, social agencies, and MMOs to deliver relevant services to the community. This is the right direction to take and we will build on this.

28. MUIS will continue to maintain the infrastructure of our mosques with the Mosque Upgrading Programme. We are also working towards the building of a new mosque in Punggol. In due course, we can also expect new mosques in Woodlands and Jurong West.

29. The Office of the Mufti will work closely with mosque leaders to enhance quality of religious content delivered at mosques. It will assist with the planning and conceptualization of lectures and also help mosque leaders engage recommended speakers.

30. A special fund of \$2.5 million has been set up to expand our empowerment and support programs to help zakat recipients achieve self-reliance and long-term stability. Crucial to this effort are our 323 trained befrienders who have reached out to 662 families. MUIS will be expanding the pool of mosque befrienders and supporting them with a comprehensive Volunteer Management System.

Conclusion

31. As a community, we have come a long way whether we want to look at the last 40 years, or the six years covered by the last 2 MUIS three-year plans. But beyond the institutions and infrastructure, we must also continue to focus on the religious outlook and temperament of our community. This is best exemplified in the way we deal with challenges that confront the community.

32. Increasingly, we are drawing inspiration from our beloved Prophet in understanding that our conviction to our faith and practices is very much entwined with being sensitive to the needs of others around us. Even when it is our faith that is being targeted, we take a composed, measured and rational approach in dealing with the challenge. This reflects a certain sense of confidence in our ability to navigate our religious life in an increasingly cosmopolitan environment that we find ourselves in.

33. Indeed, history bears some very important lessons for us. Islam flourished in places like Cordoba, Toledo, Palermo, Baghdad and Istanbul because these places embraced diversity and openness. There was a curiosity of the others that drove Muslims to interact, study, translate great works and collaborate with experts regardless of their faith backgrounds – whether they were Jews, Christians or of other faiths, to build on such works. Yet there were also periods of great intolerance even in places like the Iberian Peninsula. It is when the Muslim community is confident of itself and its faith that it is able to reap the benefits of being in a cosmopolitan society.

34. In closing, let me take this opportunity to urge community leaders and all Muslims in Singapore to continue to work closely with MUIS to build a cohesive and forward-looking Muslim community. There will be many challenges in the road ahead but with close cooperation and consistent effort, we will continue to move towards our vision of a Community of Excellence in the progressive, global city of multi-racial, multi-religious Singapore.