

Call to Muslim countries to unite for stronger voice

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KUALA LUMPUR: US President Barack Obama's calls to improve ties with the Muslim world has left many scholars here asking: "How will it be done?"

An almost three-hour intense dialogue between Muslim scholars from various countries said the mistrust built over the years between the United States and the Muslim world would not be solved overnight.

Some wanted Malaysia to take the lead in talks with the US to improve ties, while others felt it was everyone's duty to resolve conflicts affecting Muslims and the US.



Panellist Tan Sri Razali Ismail said very few Muslim countries practised the way Malaysia carried out democracy.

"Muslim countries in the Middle East have the power and money. However, most of these leaders have failed the Muslim world. The Middle East is not united."

Razali stressed that Malaysia was a success story financially and a multiracial society at best.

"If we can have a balanced equation, we can have a bigger voice."

Razali said this in reply to a question by a Lebanese participant who felt strongly that Obama's calls were rhetoric.

He said Israel was a close ally of the US, which was also a stumbling block for peace between the US and the Muslim world.

Razali said Obama's speech was meant to heal the world, rather than talking about the terrible days before.

"I am sick and tired of people demonising Israel. There are people in Israel who want to free Palestine. It's the leaders who want to have war," he said during "USA and the Muslim World -- Engagement? Or rhetoric?" forum at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, yesterday.

Forum moderator Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan felt it was only fair to wait for six months to a year before judging if Obama's speech was rhetoric or not.

"We have a president who wants to improve the situation. He has a big challenge to face with Palestinian as it is a difficult problem to settle."

Jawhar, who is also New Straits Times Press (M) Berhad chairman, said Muslim countries should set aside their differences and unite to have a stronger voice to mend ties between the US and Muslims.

"We should give Obama a chance by being united and working together," he added.

There were also comments from Malaysians who felt the US had failed to understand the core principles of Islam.

Panellist Nasir Abbasi from the US Embassy said the US was not against Islam but against extremists who killed innocent people in public places.

"I am an American Muslim. The government hired me in the foreign service. I have no problems being a Muslim in the US."

Nasir said Obama's speech was not rhetoric as "the forum today clearly states the US is serious in extending an olive branch to the Muslims".

Panellist Prof Datuk Mohamad Abu Bakar wondered how much Obama was willing to give in to reduce the mistrust between the west and Muslims affected by the Palestinian issue.

"He still has to work within the US policy framework or the US citizens might reject him."