

Philippine board joins World Halal Forum

THE Third World Halal Forum was recently held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The event was attended by hundreds of delegates from more than 40 countries from the Middle East, China, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the United States, Europe, and Africa.

The international event was graced by Malaysia's Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the keynote speaker. Other personalities who attended the forum included state leaders, senior government ministers from various countries, as well as delegates from the entire value chain of the *halal* industry, from manufacturing, trade and investment, standards, shariah, and science.

"Halal" is an Arabic word which means "permissible," referring to any product or service which is allowed to be consumed or used by Muslims under Islamic law. The *halal* industry is a multibillion-dollar global industry, which the Philippines has not fully exploited.

The Third World Halal Forum was hosted by the Halal Industry Development Corp. (HDC). HDC was established to coordinate the overall development of the industry, focusing mainly on the development of *halal* standards, audit and certification, capacity building for *halal* products and services. HDC also promotes and facilitates growth and participation of Malaysian compa-

nies in the global *halal* market.

HDC spearheads Malaysia's vision to develop *halal* as a powerful market force, bringing the benefits of *halal* products and services to both Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the world.

The Muslim Mindanao Halal Certification Board, supported by the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao Regional Government (ARMM), signed the memorandum of understanding for technical cooperation between HDC represented by its chief executive officer Dato' Jamil Bedin and Muslim Mindanao Halal Certification Board (MMHCB) represented by Ustadz Esmal Ebrahim, the managing director of the board. Delegates from ARMM were headed by Secretary Atty. Ishak Mastura of DTI-ARMM.

The HDC and MMHCB agreed to work and cooperate in the harmonization of the international *halal* certification protocol involving *halal* certification system and abattoirs to work and cooperate with each other for the introduction, establishment and implementation of *halal* pro-



■ Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at the Third World Halal Forum.

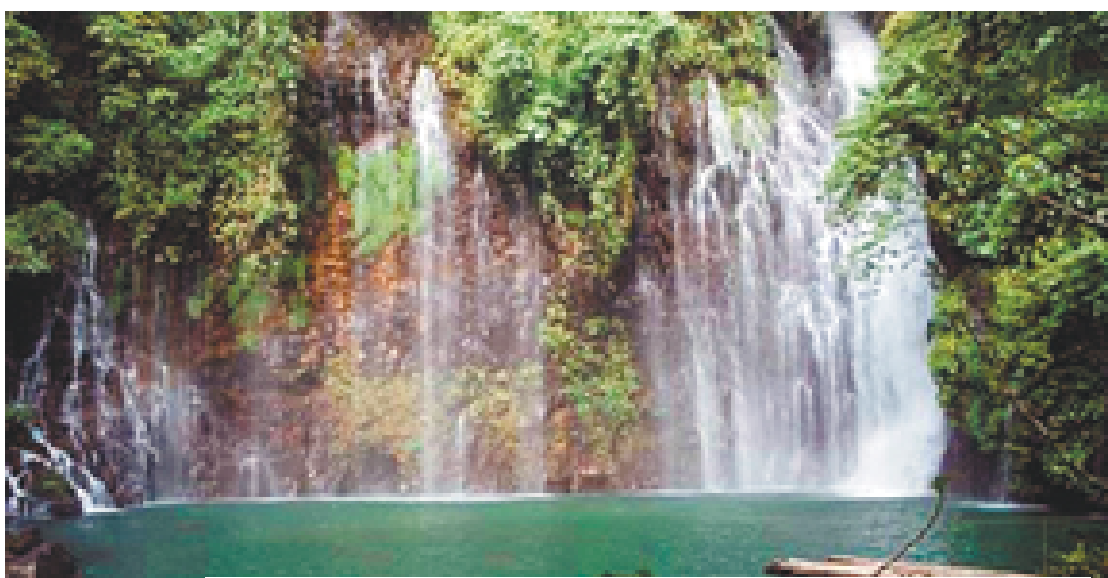
cesses for the *halal* industry players in the Philippines based on Philippine Halal Food General Guidelines, Philippine National Standard

2067 series of 2008 on halal Food Standard, and Malaysia's MS1500:2004.

The government of Malaysia,

through HDC, pledged its support to the development of *halal* industry in the Philippines and in the ARMM. Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah

Ahmad Badawi, in his keynote address, specifically mentioned Malaysia's commitment to the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.



■ Tinago Falls is one of Lanao's best-kept secrets. (Inset) Samal boys go boating, as they enjoy the last days of summer.

Moro youth enjoy last days of summer

SUMMER is almost over! Moro youth, liberated from the burdens of academic responsibilities, have "veged out" and played computer games till their fingers ached (or their pockets emptied).

For many kids who do not have their own laptops and PCs or had no access to Internet cafes, summer found them out of doors, playing the games their parents and grandparents indulged in when they too were young and carefree.

For those lucky enough to live on islands or near lakes and waterfalls, summer meant water fun everyday. For the Muslims who were teenagers in the 60s, The Doors captured the passing of summer:

*"Summer's almost gone
Summer's almost gone
Almost gone
Yeah, it's almost gone
Where will we be
When the summer's gone?
"Morning found us calmly unaware
Noon burn gold into our hair
At night, we swim the laughin' sea
When summer's gone
Where will we be?"*

Perhaps The Doors had also frolicked in the warm sea of Tawi-Tawi, or enjoyed the invigorating Maria



■ The famous Maria Cristina Falls.

Cristina Falls and Tinago Falls of Lanao, or swam in the placid Lake Lanao. It's not too late for those adventurous enough to go to Mindanao and enjoy the pleasures of her bountiful nature.

» feature

Pakistan media claims to be freest in Islamic world

TEXT AND PHOTO BY DANTE "KLINK" ANG 2ND EXECUTIVE EDITOR

KARACHI, Pakistan: Journalists here claim the media in Pakistan is the freest among Muslim countries—despite the fact that the country is ruled by a former military general who came to power in a coup.

"The media is almost as free here as it is in Britain," said Anil Datta, a Karachi Press Club member, adding that Pakistani media is even freer than their counterparts in the United States. He is also a senior sub-editor and reporter of *The News*, which is part of the Jang Group of Newspapers, one of the major media organizations in this country.

"Among the Islamic countries, it is the most free," he added.

Unlike most places, print media is not in decline in Pakistan, because there are few alternative media products other than radio and television, Datta explained. "Here, everybody can't afford information technology [like the Internet]."

The problem is, even newspapers are relatively expensive in Pakistan, where 60 million of the 160-million population cannot even afford to eat two meals a day, said Abdulhameed Chapra, a former president of the Karachi Press Club.

For example, the largest English broadsheet, the *Dawn*, sells for 15 rupees (about \$0.25).

Not even 8 percent of the population read—or can afford to regularly buy—a newspaper, Chapra added.

At least, the number of newspaper readers seems to be growing.

According to Internet sources citing documents from the US Library of Congress, the number of print media in Pakistan has declined but total circulation has more than doubled.

"From 1994 to 1997, the total number of daily, monthly and other publications increased from 3,242 to 4,455 but had dropped to just 945 by 2003 with most of the decline occurring in Punjab province," according to the 2005 report. Punjab

is the biggest of four provinces in Pakistan, also its cultural and intellectual hub.

But the report added: "From 1994 to 2003, total print circulation increased substantially particularly for dailies [3 million to 6.2 million]."

Print media is published in 11 languages, according to the report.

One Pakistani said he believes the English-language newspapers are most influential and the most trusted, but their circulation is fewer than those in Urdu, the official language.

Datta said newspapers rank behind TV as the most influential medium, because the latter has more reach. Other members of the Karachi Press Club believe that radio, particularly BBC (or the British Broadcasting Corp.) radio, is the most influential.

Regardless of the medium, Pakistan's demand for news is said to be insatiable, more so in times of political turbulence. Even those in power seem to respect the influence of media.

President Pervez Musharraf, who came to power in a bloodless coup in 1999, "ushered in increased freedom for the print media and a liberalization of broadcasting policies," according to a report posted on the BBC News website.

"However, media rules were tightened in 2007 in the midst of an opposition campaign against the president. The legislation gave the broadcasting regulator more power to shut down TV stations."

A government official from External Publicity Wing insists the media in Pakistan is free. The government does not mind criticism and the print media is not regulated at all, said the official, who did not wish to be named.

What cannot be criticized by the press is the country's founding father, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and Islamic values cannot be ridiculed, he added.

Others, like Saeed Sarbazi, feel there are more things prohibited than what the government is willing to admit.

Sarbazi, the Karachi Press Club vice president and an edition editor



■ Najeeb Ahmed (left), president of the Karachi Press Club, says there is press freedom in Pakistan. His club members say the country is the freest among Muslim nations. The press club is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

of *Daily Business Recorder*, said he was kidnapped and kept blindfolded for several days. He was also beaten up, before being released after an uproar from the press club.

He believes that his "crime" was to lend assistance to people tagged by government as rebels who sought sanctuary at the press club. To this day, Sarbazi said he does not know who kidnapped him, but he suspects people connected with government. His experience does not seem to

have dampened the spirit of journalists here, though.

In fact, this is a milestone year for Pakistani media. The Karachi Press Club, established in 1958, is celebrating its golden jubilee this December, and the members said they are planning a major celebration.

Chapra said the press club is the largest east of the Suez Canal. The club boasts of more than 800 members and 300 plus associate members, who work in allied fields, like advertising.

Sports: More than just medals

BY ALIAH Q. DIMAPORO



JIHADIST

IN 2003, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 58/5 that systematically placed sports as an instrument for peace and development. In the same year, the Province of Lanao del Norte hosted the Palarong Pambansa in the Mindanao Civic Center, consequently creating an opportunity to reverse the generally negative perception of Lanao del Norte as a conflict zone.

Summer has since then become eventful for the local residents of Lanao del Norte, as visitors from across the nation and abroad come to participate in major sports and social events at the Mindanao Civic Center.

Occupying 71 hectares of land, the Center has an Olympic-sized sports facilities: track and field, swimming pool, tennis courts, outdoor volleyball and basketball courts, baseball and softball fields, an archery field, a fitness center with complete and latest training equipment, and mirrored rooms built for taekwondo, ballet, dance and other classes. It boasts a gymnasium of 5,000 seating capacity and a stadium of 15,000 seating capacity.

Conveniently located near the bus station, along the national highway in Tubod, the capitol town of Lanao del Norte, the Center also has

a trade center, hotel and cafeteria.

We in Lanao del Norte hope to realize Resolution 58/5: Sports as a means to promote education, health, development and peace. Despite severe challenges, Lanao del Norte has progressed beyond the conflicts which marked Muslim-Christian relations during the 1970's. The Mindanao Civic Center is the physical embodiment of just one of the peace-keeping efforts of Lanao del Norte—a *Sports for Peace Program* conceptualized in the 1990's.

After the MILF attack on Kauswagan in 2000, Lanao del Norte redeemed its image by hosting the *1st Mindanao Friendship Games* in 2001. Major sports events followed suit, including Palarong Pambansa 2003, various leagues in partnership with Department of Education, out-of-town PBA games, and the Philippine National Olympics-Boxing in 2006.

This summer, Mindanao Olympics Festival will be hosting at least 1,500 delegates in the Mindanao Civic Center.

The direct relationship of sports with peace and development may not be easily apparent, though to athletes, this relationship is universal. However, it can be seen that sports has contributed to the development of fundamental human values. Athletes are trained to have a balance of discipline, determination, perseverance, a sense of camaraderie with teammates as well as opponents, fair play and humility.

Then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan addressed the Olympic Roundtable Forum in 2002 by saying "sports can play a role in improving the lives of individuals. Not only individuals, I might add, but whole communities as well. I am convinced that the time is right to build on that understanding, to encourage governments, development agencies and communities to think how sports can be included more systematically in the plans to help children, particularly those living in the midst of poverty, disease and conflict."

Sports, and its development of human values, dates back to ancient times, during the Greek Olympic Games. Olympism in fact views sports as something that aids

integral human development, promoting peaceful and just societies. According to the Olympic Charter, the goal of the Olympic Movement is "to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sports practiced without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."

As our elders and leaders busy themselves with negotiations and politics, children participate in the peace process through simple and natural desire to play. For children, peace learned through sports becomes simple and enjoyable.

This summer's Mindanao Olympic Festival highlights the solidarity and co-existence between people of all ages and social, cultural and religious backgrounds. It is this principle that the Mindanao Civic Center embodies. This is a place that can bring people together. This is the pride of the local residents of Lanao del Norte as they welcome tourists and athletes.

Inside and around these walls, the peacekeeping efforts of Lanao del Norte prevail.

Aliah Q. Dimaporo is the Director for International Operations of the World Youth Alliance.



■ Kids enjoy an afternoon of kite-flying.

Reliving traditional Maranao games

BY ATHIENA RAMOS MAMAILAO
SPECIAL TO THE MANILA TIMES

GROWING up in this computer generation, I have witnessed many transitions: from manual to automatic, from simple (and free) native games to the more complex (and expensive) online and computer games.

It's a sad fact that our kids no longer enjoy our traditional games. These games never failed to amuse us, strengthening our bodies at the same time. Here are some of the traditional games we Maranaos have enjoyed long before the advent of Ragnarok, Tantra, ViceCity and other virtual games.

Kanggagalawangae—This is a game played by two teams, each composed of four or more members. The playing area (at least rectangular and wide enough for the players to run around) is divided into six intersections. Each member of the offensive team has to cross every line without being caught or "touched" by any member of the defensive team.

Kanggagarutaya—This is what is commonly known as "tug-of-war," played by two teams with equal number of members. A rope is held by both teams and "tugged" toward their side of the field. Whoever crosses the centerline dividing the team loses the game.

Kazhipa—It literally means "kicking" and is considered to be the oldest among the Maranao games. This game is played individually and can have as many players on the field. A rattan ball and a quadrangular leather or wood is needed in this game. The leather or wood is attached to each player's lower leg (right or left) and is used to kick the ball up in the air.

The ball is continuously kicked and passed to each player. Whoever misses is considered out of the game. These days, this is still played by elderly males in Banggolo (Marawi) every morning and serves as an entertainment to both dwellers and passers-by.

Kazhagayan—This is an example of a "war" game played by two



■ Kazhipa: Maranao's version of sipa.

teams. No specific number of members of each team is required. However, every player has to have two weapons: a sword and an armor or breastplate. Each member has his own counterpart and they are to "fight" using their swords.

Like a typical war game, the person who is not able to defend himself against his enemy is "killed" and is out of the game. However, *Kazhagayan* is now considered a form of entertainment performed in cultural presentations.

Kambabathinga—This is quite similar to *Kanggagalawangae*. There are two sets of players with no limit to the number of its members. A special "spot" or "base" (preferably circle) is designated which the defensive team has to guard. The main goal of this game is for a team to do a "bathing" without being caught by the other team. While the base is guarded, other members of the defensive team may run around and catch members of the offensive team until no one is left to do the "bathing." The moment an offensive player goes inside the base and scores while yelling the word "bathing," the game ends.

While we may find ourselves enjoying the comforts of this computer age that has dominated most of our leisure time, we need to be reminded of what and who we really are. We are not just swayed by any robot or computer chip. Long before computer games, we Maranaos found our own ways to enjoyment and entertainment.

AIM project fostering Islamic leadership launched

BY KATRICE R. JALBUENA REPORTER

"AND we made the leaders guiding by Our Command and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds to establish regular prayers and to regular prayers and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us." (Quran 1, Anbiyaa, 21:73)

A new program project by the Asian Institute of Management (AIM)-Team Energy Center for Bridging Societal Divides aims to contribute to the building of productive peaceful and progressive Islamic communities through the development of exemplary Muslim leaders.

The project, dubbed "*Amanah: Fostering Islamic Leadership, Transforming Communities—Developing an Islamic Leadership Framework in the Philippines and Southeast Asia*" was launched recently at AIM.

Funded by a P14-million grant by the United Kingdom, the project has a duration of two years and aims to take the best practices and customs of Islamic leadership, propagate, and encourage such practices through the development of materials and leadership trainings.

The project will partner with academic institutions and will also offer a fellowship program for Islamic leaders who present concrete projects to improve their respective communities.

"We need to develop Islamic leaders who will actively work in reforming the education, health, governance and economic systems in their respective communities, with the ultimate goal of improving human security in the Southeast Asian region," said Hon. Meg Munn, Parliamentary Undersecretary of



■ Meg Munn MP, UK Foreign Office Minister for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, recently visited Manila on May 2 to 3, 2008. She called on Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita; Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo; Social Welfare Secretary Esperanza Cabral; and Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Jesus Dureza. Munn launched the Islamic Leadership Project of the Asian Institute of Management recently.

State and Minister for Southeast Asia of the UK during her keynote address at the launch.

According to Munn, the UK has had to take a hard look at their relationships with the Islamic community in the wake of the suicide bombings that hit London, England on July 2005, when four Muslims born in the UK of Pakistani descent strapped themselves with bombs and blew themselves up in a subway train and a passenger bus, killing scores of people.

"While we recognized that it is a very, very small minority group of people who are involved in terrorist acts. We also have to ask ourselves what has happened within our community that needed to change," the UK senior minister said.

"We met with Muslim communities in UK and recognized projects that needed to take place so that the young people would not easily be radicalized," she said. "No matter what religion you belong to, at their core is a message of peace. Islam is a religion of

peace and we need to develop leaders who can combat the twisted messages sent out by radicals."

The Amanah project, is designed to foster cross-cultural openness and understanding and enhance skills in peaceful conflict resolution.

The end result would also include the development of an Islamic leadership framework that will not only be implemented here in the Philippines but will also be initiated and adapted in other Islamic communities in Indonesia and Malaysia thereby not only improving the lives of those in the communities but also increasing the peace and security of the region.

"There is a prevailing sentiment among scholars that exemplary practice of Islamic leadership today does not get the attention it deserves," said Prof. Ernesto Garilao, a former Philippine socioeconomic planning minister and an executive director of AIM-Team Energy Center. "Promoting and nurturing exemplary practice of Islamic leadership is critical."

"This project aims to develop mid-to high level Islamic leadership programs that will train a wide array of political, military, business and religious leaders engaged in promoting development, multiculturalism and diversity," said Garilao.

The project provides leadership programs for political, military, business and religious leaders coming from Muslim communities. The project will develop leadership programs through partner academic and Islamic institutions. The development of leadership within Muslim communities overseas complements the work that is being done in the UK as well as other UK supported projects in empowering the Ulama, Muslim interns in business, training for Local Government Poverty Reduction teams in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, and NGO Peace Projects.

The project is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as part of its Counter Terrorism and Radicalization Program.



» MANILA ULAMA MEETING

Ulama moves closer to national organization. Seizing the momentum created by the First National Summit of Ulama in the Philippines held in January, ulama from Luzon, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan and the Zamboanga Peninsula endorsed the draft by-laws for the creation of a federated umbrella organization for the ulama (Islamic scholars and Muslim religious leaders) in the Philippines. The National Summit instructed a Technical Working Group (TWG) be formed to draft the by-laws and organizational mechanism for the federation. Consultative forums were organized by the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID) in the University of the Philippines, Diliman, as well as in Zamboanga to discuss the by-laws drafted by the TWG. While strong ulama groups already exist at the provincial and regional level, there is no national organization which would include these influential Muslim religious groups. Dr. Hamid Barra, convener of PCID and a member of the Bishops-Ulama Conference representing the ulama, stressed that a unified ulama can potentially have a positive impact in addressing many of the major problems affecting Muslim communities in the country.

■ PALESTINIAN FROM D4

Palestinian refugees dream of coming home

influential opposition Islamic Action Front, demonstrators chanted slogans such as "They have sold Al-Aqsa for dollars!"—referring to the mosque in Jerusalem that is the third holiest site in Islam.

According to Wael Ismail in the Bekaa refugee camp, he and his seven siblings also born there are a "lost generation who only know Palestine from photos or the idea they create of it."

For Ali Abu Haidi, 29, originally from Qalqilya in the West Bank, "the conclusion to draw from the time spent in the camps is that it is our job to return to our homes on our land and to be reunited with our families."

When asked about Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations his answer is clear:

"The solution is simple and has been there forever—when they give me the right to return to my land peace, will be possible," Haidi said.

"They cannot deprive a man of his land, his identity, his country. I am sure one day our right to return will be given back to us," he added.

But such optimism is uncommon in Bekaa. "We live in misery and have few opportunities to find work. And the only jobs available are the hardest work such as warehouseman or dustman," 25-year-old Khalid Abdullah said.

Despite being unemployed he struggles to support four brothers and sisters and takes a pragmatic approach.

"When I have found a job and we have decent conditions in which to live, only then will I start to talk about the right to return."

For Palestinians the refugee issue is the core of the decades-old Middle East conflict, and it has bedeviled past peace efforts as Israel refuses to countenance the right to return.

The Manila Times
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A DECADE AFTER SUHARTO'S FALL

Political Islam grows in Indonesia—analysts

JAKARTA: A decade after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia, democracy is providing fertile ground for the growth of political Islam in the world's most populous Muslim country, analysts said.

As the country prepares to remember Suharto's 32 years in power on the 10th anniversary of his resignation on May 21, many see the rising strength of political Islam as a defining characteristic of Indonesia's reborn democracy.

From the 2002 Bali bombing blamed on Islamic militants to the current debate on the banning of a minority Islamic sect over its so-called deviant views, analysts say the battle between the forces of moderation and intolerance is far from won.

They cite the spread of strict Wahabist teachings in Islamic schools, the debate among mainstream Islamic parties about sharia law and women's rights, and vigilante campaigns against "immodesty" as causes for concern.

But others say the real gains for Islam in Indonesian politics since Suharto have been at the moderate center, not the fanatical fringe.

These analysts point to the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), which has emerged as a major political force in the past four years through a moderate message that appeals to mainstream Indonesian Muslims.

The party is hoping to win 110 seats in the 550-seat parliament in next year's general elections, compared to just seven in 1999, the year after Suharto's fall, and 45 in 2004.

In contrast, the United Development Party, the country's largest Muslim political grouping that was established under Suharto in 1973, did not manage to improve on its 58 seats in the 2004 polls.

Analysts said PKS owes its success to a softening of its Islamic edges and to its clean image in a country rated as one of the world's most corrupt.

But many suspect the party, which began as a zealous student movement inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, has not fully abandoned its youthful radicalism.

"After they failed to achieve their target in 1999, they made a big and important transformation in strategy," said Eep Saefullah, a political analyst from the University of Indonesia.

"But it's obviously for the 2009 elections and it's limited to the party's surface."

Despite its softer rhetoric, the PKS has never opposed sharia law in Indonesia or spelled out its position on issues such as freedom of religion and woman's rights.

"The war within [the party] is still going on," Sparingga said.

Islamic parties helped bring Suharto to power as allies against the powerful communist movement in 1965 to 1966, but they were quickly brought to heel as the general consolidated his "New Order" military-led regime.

The more radical Islamic parties were simply banned and only the most moderate were tolerated, within a system that allowed opposition but mercilessly crushed any existential threat to the general's rule.

Now that the shackles have been lifted, some Islamic leaders have sought to capitalize on the post-9/11 tensions between the Muslim world and the West to drum up support for an Islamic state.

It is these organizations that are winning support among the mil-



Political Islam is still on rise in Indonesia a decade after Suharto's fall.

lions of disadvantaged Indonesians who feel left behind by Western-style democracy and globalization.

The most outspoken Indonesian Islamist cleric, Abu Bakar Bashir, who spent time in prison for his alleged links to the Jemaah Islamiyah regional terror group, still calls non-Muslims "maggots" and "snakes" and urges his followers to beat up tourists in the streets.

But political analyst Saefullah said even in areas where sharia law has been imposed at the village level, there was limited support for Islamist fanaticism.

"I don't see that the local sharia bylaws are being backed by the population," he said.

The leaders of the country's biggest party, the secular Golkar, are watching nervously as Islamic parties

like the PKS challenge for the country's political center.

Golkar chairman Jusuf Kalla, the country's vice president, last week urged voters to focus on their practical needs in the buildup to next year's elections and not be seduced by religious sermonizing.

"Religious leaders often sell heaven very cheaply," he reportedly said in a speech. **AFP**

» interview

Traditions deter Indonesian women's progress

JAKARTA: Although some Indonesian women exceeded or equaled the position of men in many sectors of life, the social status of the nation's women as a whole is still far behind, a woman leader said recently.

Rita Subowo, the first Indonesian woman taking up the post of the chairmanship of KONI, the country's top sport council, told Xinhua in an interview that the traditional challenges of discrimination against women had hampered their progress.

The archipelago country is home to a population of more than 230 million people comprising hundreds of ethnic groups with most of them still exercising traditional culture and habit of putting women on the back banner.

"In many cultures, families give priority to men's progress than the women's. This gives women difficulty to progress," she said.

Although many women in the country had been able to reach top positions in politics, business and social life, their number is still incomparable to men.

"Actually, the Indonesian women

have been on progress, but their quantity is still low," she said.

Subowo said that all the traditional barriers could be overcome gradually and surely by raising the level of education in both genders, which could improve the insight and the way of their thinking.

To change them internally through education was much easier than to change them externally by changing their culture or habit. This has been long rooted in the community, said Subowo.

"To change the tradition is very difficult. But better education will lead the women to have a wider insight, which can make them think and realize by themselves about their right and capabilities," she said.

"Please do not let Indonesian women think that they're just made to be migrant workers only," said Subowo.

Having minimal education, hundreds of thousands of Indonesian people, most of them are women, have been working in less prestigious positions, mostly helpers, in many foreign countries.

The chairperson added that the

highly-educated men would easily understand their spouses and tend to put them on an equal position.

She urged the government to give more opportunities to women in the fields of politics, economy and others.

In addition, she said, the country's female organizations must actively encourage their members to seek progress.

Subowo said that in reality, there were many positions which were more suitable for women.

"In sports, many achievements have been contributed by women athletes. Only women can manage them and understand them properly," she said.

Since the first awakening of the Indonesian women led by the heroic struggle of Raden Ajeng Kartini (born on April 20, 1879) more Indonesian women have become active to seek progress, including President Megawati and incumbent Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, among others.

Unfortunately, education still cannot be improved further due to the lack of budget.

Huge amount of foreign debt,

poverty and seismic corruption are among the major challenges which must be addressed by the promising-administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Besides, the government, which has done a lot to overcome such obstacles, has now grappled with soaring global oil prices which have exceeded \$120 a barrel and food crisis. The government must cut over 15 percent of the budget in each ministry, including the ministry for education.

Some have been done by the government, such as the inclusion of four women in the cabinet and the target of 30 percent of women members in the parliament. But the target has not reached yet.

Subowo said the Indonesian culture and habit as a whole does not put women on priority to progress. Housework has also hampered women's social progress, said Subowo.

"The women usually can do something else for their progress, should the economic problem of their family be settled first," she said.

XINHUA

Palestinian refugees dream of going home

BEKAA CAMP, Jordan: Wael Ismail was born in the Bekaa refugee camp in Jordan and knows Palestine only as a concept based on pictures and television. But his burning passion is one day to live in the land of his ancestors.

"I was born in Bekaa and I even have Jordanian citizenship but I dream only of one thing—to be able to return to Palestinian land with my children," he said outside his shop in the bustling camp.

At 34, Ismail is too young to have witnessed the *Naqba* or "catastrophe" when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians left their homes 60 years ago on Israel's creation, but his determination to reclaim his heritage is strong.

"We are denied our rights, our land, and so we are left with one thing—hope," he said.

Thousands of Palestinians across Middle East recently marked the *Naqba*—the defeat of Arab armies and the expulsion or flight of about 760,000 people—as US President George W. Bush attended Israeli celebrations on the birth of the Jewish state.

Israeli troops fired into the air to

break up a rally in the Gaza Strip while sirens sounded across Ramallah calling thousands to a demonstration demanding the right to return for some 4.5 million refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and the West Bank.

In Baddawi refugee camp near the north Lebanese town of Tripoli, Palestinian factions staged a general strike. Palestinian flags flew at street corners alongside placards bearing the slogan "No U-turn on the right to return."

At Ain al-Helweh camp near Sidon in south Lebanon, hundreds of children in traditional clothing waved flags and carried banners bearing the names of Palestinian towns and villages abandoned in 1948.

In Egypt around 100 protesters marched through central Cairo holding signs that read: "Liberating Palestine is a sacred duty" and "60 years of resistance."

Nearly 600 men, women and children demonstrated in the Jordanian capital Amman on Thursday evening, demanding the right to return.

In the protest called by the **Palestinian D2**

» feature

Bangladesh writer Taslima Nasreen plans to return to India

■ Exiled Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen poses with her book *Da ma prison (From my jail)* in Paris. Nasreen said she plans to return to her adoptive home India by August, just months after she was hounded out of the country by Islamic radical death threats.

AFP PHOTO



PARIS: Exiled Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen said she plans to return to her adoptive home India by August, just months after she was hounded out of the country by Islamic radical death threats.

Nasreen fled to Sweden in March after five months in an Indian government safe house, where she said the stress from her isolated, prison-like conditions sent her blood pressure soaring and affected her heart and eyesight.

On May 19 in Paris for the release of a book on her time in hiding, she told Agence France-Presse she had recovered her health, and planned to fly back to India before August 17, when her current six-month resident permit expires.

"I hope that the Indian government will allow me to stay so that I can live there peacefully," said the soft-spoken 45-year-old, who radical Muslim leaders have vowed never to let return.

"Whether I would be allowed to live a normal life or whether I would be forced to live under house arrest I don't know. So I have to go there and see."

Nasreen was first forced to flee Bangladesh in 1994 after radical Muslims accused her of blasphemy over her novel *Lajja*—meaning "shame"—that depicts the life of a Hindu family persecuted by Muslims in the country.

After years in exile in Europe and the United States, the doctor-turned-author had made the West Bengal state capital of Kolkata—a region culturally close to her native Bangladesh—her new home.

She had been seeking permanent residence in India but New Delhi stalled the request, fearful of a backlash from the country's 140-million-plus Muslims, granting her only temporary visas.

Then in November she was forced to leave Kolkata after receiving death threats from radical Indian Muslims, and hounded into hiding in New Delhi where she says the government repeatedly urged her to leave the country.

Nasreen said she was "devastated" to have been forced into a second exile, and lashed out at Indian politicians for failing to stand up for her in the face of extremist death threats.

"I'm very, very shocked. Still I am in shock. It's like a nightmare what happened there."

"If it happened in Pakistan, in any Muslim country, I could have said OK, it can happen. But I couldn't expect it from the Indian government where the majority are Hindus."

She accused India's secular politicians of "appeasing" fundamentalists in order to win votes in India's growing Muslim community, while invoking the principle of respect for religious minorities.

"When the so-called secular people, only because of votes, bow their head in front of fundamentalists and appease them, then they destroy the country. That is the most dangerous thing."

"By throwing me out, the government of Bangladesh gave victory to the fundamentalists. Now the same thing happened in India."

Nasreen insisted on the need to

speak out against the oppression of women in Indian society, across religious boundaries.

"I was trying to give strength and courage to people, especially women, whatever their religion, whether they are atheist or non-atheist, Hindu or Christian or Muslim."

"It's not that I was vandalizing Islam. I was writing about women's rights. I was criticizing culture and traditions, even Hindu culture and traditions, that are very much misogynist," she said.

"I told the truth. I cannot resist from telling the truth. Freedom of expression means the freedom to offend people. If you can't offend others, how can you change society?"

Nasreen, who holds Swedish citizenship from her first spell in exile in the 1990s, said she could not imagine her future in Europe.

"Maybe I would survive here. But if I am out of my language and culture and away from the people for whom I'm writing and trying to change things, it would not be the life that I want."

"I get solidarity, support, sympathy from the Western countries," said Nasreen, who was awarded the Simone de Beauvoir prize for women's freedom from French Human Rights Minister Rama Yade.

"But I cannot imagine a future here. Otherwise maybe I would not be able to live as a writer."

Nasreen is living in Sweden with a friend, without police protection and where she spent the past two months aside from trips to southern France and the United States.

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