

Rock Star Rattles Radical Islam

Popular Indonesian Singer Woos Youths With Songs of Peace and Romance

By Rebecca U. Cho
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To the millions of Indonesian youths who sell out his concerts, Ahmad Dhani is a superstar who has commanded the nation's rock scene for more than a decade.

But the charismatic leader of Dewa, one of Indonesia's top bands, isn't just any entertainer crooning about the heartaches of romantic love. Dhani is an ambassador for peace, using his music to lead Indonesia's youth away from radical Islam.

This week, the Muslim rocker was in the United States to share his message of religious tolerance with an entirely different audience: top U.S. government and military leaders at a national conference on homeland defense.

Dhani, 34, says attacking the ideology that motivates terrorists is the key to suppressing radical Islam.

With a longtime acquaintance, former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, Dhani spoke to the group on Tuesday about a long-term strategy to combat religious extremism.

"The countries in the West cannot be disengaged from the Muslim world," Dhani said in an interview before his speech. "Building up the values of tolerance is critical in Indonesia and the Muslim world in order to defeat terrorism."

The 2006 National Homeland Defense Foundation Symposium in Colorado Springs, Colo., ran through Thursday. Other speakers at the conference included Frances Fragos Townsend, homeland security adviser to President Bush, and George W. Foresman, undersecretary for preparedness at the Department of Homeland Security.

Dhani says Dewa appeals to a broad fan base not only because of the band's catchy melodies and energetic onstage performances, but also because its music reaches out to the people of Indonesia on a spiritual level. At the heart of Dewa's songs is a message of peace among all religions that promotes a harmonious, moderate Islam.

Also, of course, "we're handsome guys," Dhani joked through a translator during a phone interview from his home in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country.

References to the Koran are woven into one of Dewa's most popular songs, "Laskar Cinta," or "Warriors of Love." Dhani said he wrote the lyrics to beckon his fans into a loving Islam.

"Hey there, all you lovers of peace," the song goes. "Watch out, watch out and be on guard -- for lost souls, anger twisting their hearts, for lost souls, poisoned by ignorance and hate. . . . Warriors of Love, teach the mystical science of love, for only love is the eternal truth and the shining path for all God's children everywhere in the world."

As a teenager, Dhani dropped out of a school that embraced Wahhabism, a strictly traditional Islamic sect, to begin Dewa. The group quickly became one of the most popular rock bands in Indonesia.

The November 2004 release of the album "Laskar Cinta" marked a turn in Dhani's music from love songs toward direct denunciation of radical Islam and its spread in Indonesia. Dhani said he credits the change to his spiritual journey in Sufism, a mystical, moderate form of Islam.

The album's title was a play on Laskar Jihad, or Holy War Warriors, an Indonesian militant group possibly linked to al-Qaeda. Dhani's outspoken campaign to fight militant ideologies drew the attention of Islamic radicals. After some extremist groups started calling him an enemy of Islam, Dhani went into hiding with his wife, Indonesian pop star Maia, and their children.

Despite the furor created by their music, Dhani and his group emerged in December with a new song, also with the title "Laskar Cinta," that soared to No. 1 on Indonesian radio and MTV Asia. "Laskar Cinta" is the first track in Dewa's latest album, "Republic of Love."

Dewa's first English-language version of its music is set for international release in 2007.

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