

Faith leaders condemn terrorism at Bali conference

By **FRANCES KRAFT**

Staff Reporter

BALI, Indonesia -- Rabbi Daniel Landes, director and rosh yeshiva of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, has spent the better part of his 32-year career serving the Jewish people and working in a Jewish environment, although he has interacted with counterparts of other faiths on an academic level.

But now that he has returned from a ground-breaking multi-faith Conference in Indonesia where he was the first rabbi to speak publicly in the world's largest Muslim country, he feels it was a mistake not to have become involved in this kind of dialogue before.

"I went from almost zero to 100," he said in a phone interview from his office at Pardes, which is open to students of all Jewish backgrounds. "I'm an Orthodox rabbi. My life has totally been very much within my people."



*From left, Hindu spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, and Rabbi Daniel Landes share a platform at the recent multifaith conference in Bali.
[Photo courtesy of the Simon Wiesenthal Center]*

Rabbi Landes joined Indonesia's former president, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Hindu spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (not the sitarist of the same name) as one of three main speakers sharing a platform at a June 12 Bali conference called "Tolerance Between Religions: A Blessing For All Creation." Protestant, Catholic and Buddhist leaders responded to their presentation before an audience consisting mainly of 100 community activists, young imams, and Muslim and Hindu students.

"You cannot underestimate the symbolic importance of [my] sitting there with two great leaders," said the rabbi, who called the conference "uplifting."

"Those who are strong in their own faith commitments - those who represent the tradition - need to be in this type of conversation."

The trio of leaders was the first to sign a "call to action" condemning the link between religion and violence, according to a press release from the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Conference goals also included reducing the growing polarization between faiths since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, according to a press release from Pardes.

The conference was co-sponsored by the Wahid Institute, the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance, and LibForAll Foundation. Rabbi Abraham Cooper, the centre's associate dean, was moderator for the day-long event.

Rabbi Landes - a 57-year-old native of Chicago who lived in Los Angeles before moving to Israel 12 years ago - said the big fear about dialogue, not just within Orthodox Judaism, but in traditional circles in other religions, is that "you'll lose part of what you yourself believe."

"Of course what really happens - there is a transformation, but you become the better part of your own religion. You become more of who you are in a better way. That's the notion of true dialogue. On a personal level, this was a very extraordinary benefit."

Rabbi Landes - who said he was initially "the 'B' rabbi" on the program - became a main speaker after Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, former Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, was denied a visa for the gathering because of his Israeli diplomatic passport. Indonesia does not recognize the State of Israel.

Rabbi Landes, a former professor of ethics and values at Yeshiva University of Los Angeles and a former director of educational projects at the Wiesenthal centre, travelled on his American passport and wore his kippah wherever he went.

However, he said he spoke on condition that he be introduced as a rabbi from Jerusalem. "The word Israel didn't come up as much as Jerusalem, but that's okay," he said. "You do this step by step."

Rabbi Landes said that people he told about the conference in advance were concerned for his safety. He himself was "concerned, but I wasn't really fearful."

"I think I rose to the level of my compatriots," said the rabbi, referring in particular to Wahid, who has "stood for human rights on an amazing level."

At the opening plenary, Wahid - who co-authored a June 12 Wall Street Journal article with Rabbi Lau titled The Evils of Holocaust Denial - condemned Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for Holocaust denial. "He is wrong, and I say so publicly," said Wahid.

Sol Teichman, a Holocaust survivor who spoke at the event, "represented not only destruction but renewal of Jewish life," Rabbi Landes said. "In Balinese culture renewal of life is a very important cultural trope.

The Balinese people, he noted, are "tremendously traumatized" by bombings in 2005. "They no longer understand that [bombings are abhorrent] in an abstract way. They understand that in reality."

Survivors of bombings in Indonesia and Israel spoke in a session that was televised in the Middle East and Europe on the Arabic language Al Hurra satellite network, according to the Wiesenthal Center.

"Authentic purveyors of religion want to preserve life," not destroy it, said Rabbi Landes. The appeal of extremists lies in their knowledge of religion, but they're "really going against a fundamental in each religion - that life is sacred, and that God is the God of life. Terrorism is very heretical."

Rabbi Landes was surprised to see how many people knew who he was and why he was in Bali. "Everyone from the airline crew to government officials to shopkeepers" greeted him in their "very graceful way" and told him he was the first "Jewish priest" to speak publicly in Indonesia.

"There was a tremendous validation of my being there with the people," he said. Although he faced questions about Palestine and Israel that were "sometimes pretty pointed," he said he felt they were rooted more in "inquiry" than anything else.

What surprised him, he said, was "how much hope people took in [the conference]." Part of his message, he said, was "the notion of hope."

"Tolerance in many parts of the world needs a religious basis," he explained. Having that basis "strikes a very deep chord with people."

He anticipates follow-up to the conference. A professor of Jewish law, Rabbi Landes said he met professors of Islam who expressed interested in coming to Jerusalem.

"A dialogue between Muslims and Jews on the area of religious law could be very productive not just theoretically but practically," he added.