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Bali meeting promotes tolerance in Indonesia

By Peter Gelling

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JIMBARAN, Indonesia — Spiritual leaders from around the world met here in Bali on Tuesday to take a stand against religious-inspired violence and to urge other religious leaders to join them.

“We are trying to meet partners from around the globe, from all religions, who can take a leadership role and promote tolerance,” said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, one of the organizers of the event and associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human rights group based in Los Angeles.

The conference was held amid heightened security and growing unease in the capital, Jakarta, over the sensitivity of the conference’s topic. It came days after the Indonesian government refused to sign a United Nations Security Council statement condemning President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran for statements he made encouraging the destruction of Israel.

Indonesia has the world’s largest Muslim population and a government that does not recognize Israel as a country or Judaism as a religion.

One of the main goals of the conference, however, was to discuss ways of challenging Ahmadinejad’s statements and to release its own joint statement denouncing the Iranian president and others for denying the existence of the Holocaust. The statement, which was made available Tuesday, was signed by Abdurrahman Wahid, a former Indonesian president and a leading Islamic cleric. The conference was jointly organized by the Wiesenthal Center, the LibForAll Foundation, a U.S.-based non-governmental organization, and Wahid.

Indonesia’s brand of Islam, which is infused with elements of Hindu and indigenous animist beliefs, is traditionally moderate. But the government’s struggle to appease the powerful voice of conservative Muslims in the country, and to cooperate politically with other majority Muslim nations, often causes it to compromise its moderate ideas.

“We have to be patient, the government has its own calculations to make,” Wahid said in an interview on the sidelines of the conference. “The government might not always be right. So we must teach them by example.”

Dozens of university and high school students from both Java and Bali attended the conference; many had never before been in contact with a Jewish person. Several students feverishly took notes as the spiritual men spoke about their own beliefs.

“I hope, on some level, they see who I am as a person,” said Rabbi Daniel Landes, who flew from Jerusalem to speak at the conference alongside Wahid and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a leading Hindu spiritual leader. “There must be a connection between people before there can be an understanding.”

Yusuf Chudlori, a popular Indonesian cleric and member of one of the world’s largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama, said he had never interacted so closely with a Jewish rabbi before meeting Landes.

“I previously thought that Jewish people were not good for the way they treat Palestinians, but after listening to the rabbis here, I am beginning to see that our ideas are actually very similar,” he said in an interview.

Chudlori heads an Islamic boarding school in central Java that has more than 4,000 students and runs a radio station that reaches homes throughout Java.

“I hope that from this conference my students will learn that all religions have the same goals and that being good to each other is the most important thing,” he said. “The reason prejudice exists is because there is no communication between different people.”