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Indonesian peace delegation meets with Peres

Greer Fay Cashman | Dec. 8, 2007

Despite the lack of formal relations between Israel and Indonesia, a five-member Indonesian peace delegation met with President Shimon Peres on Friday. The delegation spent a week in the country under the joint aegis of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the LibForAll Foundation, which promotes the culture of liberty and tolerance.

The five Indonesians represented two major Muslim movements, Nahdlatul Ulama, generally known as NU, which is headed by former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, who is a cofounder of LibForAll, and Muhammadiyah. Together, the two movements include 70 million of the 195 million Muslims in Indonesia, out of a total population of 240 million people.

Wahid is a member of the International Board of Governors of the Peres Peace Center, in which capacity he has visited Israel in the past. Peres also visited Wahid in Indonesia, but for security reasons could not stay for more than a day.

Despite the absence of diplomatic ties, there are some Indonesian business people engaged in ventures with Israel. When Peres mentioned this, members of the delegation indicated that they were aware of this activity.

In 2005, Israel provided humanitarian aid for Indonesian, Sri Lankan and Thai victims of a massive earthquake that rocked the region.

Taylor told Peres that Wahid had issued a decree against Hamas, and said that Indonesia was the only place in the world in which Hamas had been rejected by such a large Muslim organization.

Syfiq Mugni, representing Muhammadiyah, presented Peres with a knitted kippa with the word "shalom" in Hebrew and Latin letters, plus the Indonesian word for peace - Kedamaian. Peres promptly placed the kippa on his head to the undisguised delight of his visitors.

The broad-ranging conversation covered topics including economics, politics, religion and Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations.

Peres predicted that because Indonesia is an island republic surrounded by water, it would one day be one of the most prosperous countries in the world. This is because, unlike many other countries, it would not have to import water, merely to desalinate it. In addition, because it has so much sunshine for most of the year, it can operate on solar energy, which aside from reducing energy costs, would also relieve pollution.

Peres said that Israel would be happy to enter into relations with Indonesia and to invite the Indonesian leadership, along with leaders of other countries around the globe, to join in a prayer for peace on Israel's 60th anniversary.

Peres was expected to issue a call to Jews throughout the world to attend synagogue services on the Shabbat closest to Israel Independence Day and to similarly pray for peace. He wanted to take the day of prayer to an even further dimension.

"We will call on all the children of Abraham to come and pray for peace," he said. "It will be a silent demonstration of unity."

In this context, he was referring specifically to adherents of the three monotheistic faiths - but then in further conversation, broadened the scope to include people of all faiths. Mugni spoke of Indonesia's efforts to develop its economy, its democracy and, most importantly, its educational system. "We hope this track will run faster," he said in relation to the latter. "We have economic problems, but we [also] have mentality problems. We are trying to encourage a more peaceful, more tolerant Muslim attitude. Some people oppose democracy."

Nahdlatul Ulama representative Abdul A'la, who concurred with Mugni, said there were small groups of extremists, but emphasized that through Islamic values "there must be peace. We cannot live without peace."

The group shared their experiences in speaking with Palestinian moderates who had agreed that there would be mutual benefits for both Palestinians and Israelis if there were no conflict or physical violence.

"We pray for this," said Mugni.

Peres told the group that the 1947 United Nations resolution on the partition of Palestine had not referred to a Palestinian state, but to an Arab state. "The Palestinians were not recognized as a people or a state," he said. "The Arab states never recognized the Palestinians. Israel was the first state to recognize the Palestinians as a people with a right to have a state of their own."

In June of this year, the two organizations cosponsored a conference in Bali on "Tolerance between religions," in which Hindu, Muslim and Jewish survivors of suicide bombings, as well as a Holocaust survivor, participated. The conference was organized under the patronage of Wahid.

Last October, a seven-member delegation of Indonesian journalists met with Peres, who told them that Indonesia had a significant role to play in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, mainly because Indonesia had introduced a new era in the international community's perception of Islam, by proving that modernism and religion can walk hand in hand.

Peres has often made similar remarks about Turkey, and did so again on Friday when talking with his Indonesian guests.

The peace delegation visited Israel unofficially, and also met with Palestinian moderates in Ramallah.

Accompanied by Wiesenthal Center Associate Dean Rabbi Abraham Cooper and LibForAll Foundation CEO C. Holland Taylor, the delegation enjoyed both Jewish and Muslim religious experiences, joining in a Hanukka candle-lighting ceremony followed by dancing at a hesder yeshiva in Kiryat Shmona, touring Bethlehem and attending prayers at al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem following the meeting with Peres.

They also visited school children in Sderot and went to an observation point that overlooks the Gaza Strip.