

In Indonesia, Iranian Leader Criticized

By ROBIN McDOWELL | The Associated Press | Tuesday, June 12, 2007; 1:44 PM

BALI, Indonesia -- Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, hosted an unusual gathering Tuesday of religious leaders and victims of terrorist attacks who denounced Iran's president for claiming the Holocaust was a myth.

The daylong conference on the resort island of Bali brought together Indonesia's former President Abdurrahman Wahid, Hindu spiritual head Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Buddhist teachers, a Jesuit priest and even rabbis -- rare in a country that does not recognize Israel or the Jewish religion.

One of the goals was to discuss ways to end the growing polarization between faiths since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. Another was to counter a December conference hosted by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that tried to cast doubt on the killing of an estimated 6 million Jews during World War II.

Wahid, who led Indonesia from 1999 to 2001 and remains a highly respected moderate Muslim leader, said it was important that people have the courage to speak the truth.

"Although I'm a good friend of Ahmadinejad, I have to say that he is wrong," he said. "I visited Auschwitz's Museum of Holocaust and I saw many shoes of dead people. Because of this, I believe the Holocaust happened."

A Jewish survivor of the Nazi genocide made an impassioned plea for tolerance.

"I hope people will learn from the past," said Sol Teichman, 79, who was a teenager living in Czechoslovakia when his city was occupied first by the Hungarian army and then the Germans. "We should try to improve life instead of destroying it."



Hindu spiritual leader and humanitarian Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, left, former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, center, and Director of the Pardes Institute of Jewish studies Rabbi Daniel Landes attend a conference on religious tolerance in Bali, Indonesia, Tuesday, June, 12, 2007. A Jewish Holocaust survivor made a plea for tolerance Tuesday at a conference in the world's most populous Muslim nation that also brought together religious leaders and victims of attacks by Islamic extremists. (AP Photo/Firdia Lisnawati)

The conference was sponsored by the Libforall Foundation, a U.S.-based organization that seeks to counter Muslim extremism in the Islamic world by supporting religious moderates, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance.

"Why are the Jews so concerned about the Holocaust? Well one-third of our people were killed and only within six to seven years," said Rabbi Daniel Landes, who teaches theology in Jerusalem.

"That abhors us not only as Jews, it's abhorrent to us as members of humanity," he said. "If it can happen once to a group of people, it can happen to everyone."

Security was tight at the five-star hotel that hosted the discreetly organized event.

Indonesia's government is secular and most of its 190 million Muslims are moderate, but a vocal militant fringe has grown louder in recent years. Al-Qaida-linked terrorists have twice attacked Bali -- a mostly Hindu enclave -- killing more than 220 people.

"It has been difficult for me to excuse in my heart those who committed this act," said Tumini, a Balinese woman who suffered severe burns over her body during a nightclub blast on the island in 2002.

She said she still has not recovered emotionally, physically or financially.

Holocaust survivor Teichman, speaking publicly for the first time in a predominantly Muslim nation, said Ahmadinejad's questioning of the Holocaust made him want to "push a little harder" to talk to Islamic leaders.

"I ask only one question," said Teichman, who was sent to Auschwitz, Dachau, and three other concentration camps before allied forces liberated him in 1945.

"If that is a lie, can you tell me what happened to my mother? To my sister? To my brothers? To my grandparents?"