

The Hon Stephen Smith MP
AUSTRALIAN MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Speech

30 October 2009, Perth

The Fifth Annual Regional Interfaith Dialogue

The Hon Ms Pansy Wong, New Zealand Minister for Ethnic Affairs.

His Excellency Mr Primo Joelianto, Indonesian Ambassador to Australia.

Undersecretary Nabil Tan, Office of the Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process, the Philippines.

Religious and community leaders, delegates, distinguished guests.

It is a great pleasure to speak to you at the final session of the Fifth Regional Interfaith Dialogue, hosted this year by Australia in Perth.

On behalf of our Dialogue co-sponsors, Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines, I thank all of you for your attendance and your contributions. I am very pleased that this, the first Australian hosted Regional Interfaith Dialogue is being held in Perth, my home city, and in my own electorate. Over the years, just like the rest of Australia, Perth has drawn its citizens from all across the world. With its numerous churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, it reflects not just the modern multicultural and tolerant Australia but our religious and faith diversity. We have successfully settled nearly seven million people from more than 200 countries since 1945.

The Asia-Pacific

I begin with a view of our region, where we all live. Global economic, strategic and political influence is inexorably shifting to the Asia-Pacific, to our part of the world. The national, regional and global effects of this historic shift, including for religious communities in the region, continue to unfold. This will affect every nation in our region, with our already varied histories and cultures and ways of promoting social cohesion. As well as this change, as Professor Emeritus Gary Bouma observed in his key note address, religious diversity is also increasing due to both migration and conversion. In the Asia-Pacific region, we have been fortunate that extremism has not been as prevalent as it has been in other parts of the world.

Tragically, however, a number of countries in our region have suffered its damaging effects. In the south of Thailand and in the southern Philippines, some communities have for many years faced violence carried out in the name of religion. As well, some

countries have endured terrible terrorist attacks. The hotel bombings in Jakarta in July were a potent reminder that extremism still poses a serious threat in the region.

Our region, however, has made great efforts to reject extremism. Indonesia is an especially admirable example. Indonesians have suffered from episodes of extremism during Indonesia's remarkable political and economic transformation in recent historical times to the modern Indonesian state. Indonesia has become the world's third largest democracy with the world's largest Muslim community and a strong foundation of tolerance and pluralism. The Indonesian Government and the Indonesian people have shown great courage in standing up to extremism.

In recent times, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose inauguration I attended with Prime Minister Rudd last week, has led this effort. Australia was pleased to join with Indonesia to establish and co-sponsor the first Regional Interfaith Dialogue in Yogyakarta in 2004. Our joint objective, in founding the Dialogue, was to work towards strengthening tolerance and pluralism in our region. Since the Dialogue's first meeting, Australia and Indonesia have been joined by two additional co-sponsors, New Zealand and the Philippines. Participants in the Dialogue are drawn from these four co-sponsor countries, the eight other ASEAN countries, East Timor, Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

Australian Government efforts

The Regional Interfaith Dialogue is an important element of Australia's efforts to build interfaith dialogue both in our immediate region and beyond it. In September this year in New York, I attended the Fourth Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace in the margins of the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly. This was the first time that Australia had participated as a full member of the Ministerial Meeting, following my request last year for Australia to move from observer to full Ministerial membership.

As well this year, Australia is proud to host the Parliament of the World's Religions, which will take place in Melbourne in December. The Parliament of the World's Religions is one of the largest Interfaith forums. Up to 8000 participants will gather to pursue the forum's mission: to *'cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its other guiding institutions in order to achieve a peaceful, just, and sustainable world'*.

Australia also provides practical assistance to strengthen interfaith cooperation between local communities in our region. In Mindanao in the southern Philippines, Australia's *Strengthening Grassroots Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding Program* provides small grants for local interfaith and peace-building activities. Over the years it has supported some 50 projects, provided training in dialogue, peace building and conflict resolution, and helped encourage the creation of local community networks that promote respect and cooperation.

In Indonesia, Australia has close working relationships with Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, two of the biggest Muslim community organisations in the world. Working with Muhammadiyah, Australia has helped Indonesian victims of the 2004 tsunami, and those recently affected by the earthquake in West Sumatra.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade supports a number of Institutes and Councils which foster people-to-people links between Australia and our Asian friends and neighbours. Since 2002, the Australia-Indonesia Institute's *Muslim Exchange Program* has fostered contact between emerging leaders of the Muslim communities in Australia and Indonesia. The program now has an alumni community of more than 130 young leaders, who continue to build links with other religious, ethnic and community groups.

Future Faith Leaders

Governments, however, can only do so much. You, the current and future leaders of your faiths, must do the real work of building trust between communities. You represent the great diversity of this region. As leaders in your faiths, you contribute to the peace and security of your communities, and that of the Asia-Pacific region. That is why this Fifth Regional Interfaith Dialogue has invited future faith leaders to lead and shape the discussion.

We want the Dialogue to be strong and self-sustaining. And we want you to reinforce your leadership of your communities. The reports of your discussions make me confident that you will provide this leadership.

You have fresh proposals to address familiar challenges:

- working with the media to combat stereotypes and promote religious tolerance;
- working with schools to prevent the radicalisation of young people; and
- sharing conflict resolution techniques.

I welcome these very positive proposals.

Ultimately, as you have stated in your Declaration today, the true value of the Dialogue will be measured by the success with which words are translated into action: by the people you influence when you return home, and the practical initiatives you put in place in the future to contribute to a more tolerant and harmonious society.

I highlight one such initiative, a partnership between Australia's Youth Off the Streets Overseas Relief Fund, led by Sydney's Father Chris Riley, and Indonesian welfare organisation Muhammadiyah. In March this year, after four years of planning and construction, both organisations officially opened the Children's Care Centre in Aceh, built for children orphaned by the terrible Boxing Day tsunami in 2004.

The Care Centre, run in partnership by both organisations, provides for the accommodation, education, welfare of the children. A farm also developed through this partnership will help feed the children and generate income for the Care Centre. This is a powerful example of interfaith leadership, of disparate communities working together because they see their common humanity.

You too are religious leaders who can make a difference. You have standing and influence in your communities, especially with the young. Your voices count, and your leadership matters. Best wishes for the future. Thank you.