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Rights at Home Southeast Asia Consultative Meeting

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The third Sounding Board Meeting of the ISIM's Rights at Home Project was explicitly meant as a Southeast Asian regional consultative meeting. Forty participants from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand attended, including the Malaysian hosts Chandra Muzaffar, president of JUST, Farish Noor, member of JUST, and Zainah Anwar, executive director of SIS. The 'Rights at Home' project team, with its primary consultant Abdullahi an-Na'im (Emory University, Atlanta) and programme coordinator Laila al-Zwaini (ISIM), was joined by Muhammad Khalid Masud (ISIM Academic Director) and Martin van Bruinessen (ISIM Chair at Utrecht University). Cassandra Balchin (Pakistan) and Ebrahim Moosa (USA), members of the Rights at Home Advisory Board, were also present. Following the concept of the first two Sounding Board Meetings in Yemen and Tanzania, the Malaysia meeting brought together representatives from different regions, genders, and professional backgrounds, such as human rights activists, scholars,

The ISIM project 'Rights at Home: An Approach to the Internalization of Human Rights in Family Relations in Islamic Communities' convened its third Sounding Board Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from 15 to 17 January 2003. This meeting was organized in close collaboration with its Malaysian counterparts: the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) and Sisters in Islam (SIS), an NGO committed to promoting the rights of women in the framework of Islam. Earlier sounding boards were convened in Yemen and Tanzania (See ISIM Newsletter 10, pg. 4, and 11, pg. 4).

Rather, structures that actually promote them were equally explored. For instance, the organizations that were represented in Kuala Lumpur were considered to be good examples of such promoting structures. This idea was illustrated by their prudent but enduring attempts to make use of theological, jurisprudential, sociological, and political resources to deepen the understanding of human rights in general and to strengthen those of Islamic women and children in particular.

Especially this kind of exploration brought to light some specifics of the

region: first, the relatively high level of capacity in advocacy and networking of participants and their organizations, in comparison to many agents of social change in Yemen and Tanzania; second, the experience gained over the years made the Southeast Asian counterparts increasingly aware of the rapidly changing contexts in which they operate. Until some years ago, they were used to working within societies and legal environments that were highly secularized. Accordingly, human rights issues were addressed from a secular perspective too. Now, with the progressing re-Islamization of their states, their formal structures, and legislations, they have to deal increasingly with Islamist currents. The advocacy resources that are needed to pursue their goals within the present Islamic discourse differ from those that were useful in the past. The agents of social change in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand urgently look for information about how human rights issues can be effectively dealt with from an Islamic point of view.

Finally, the participants of the Sounding Board Meeting in Malaysia commonly identified a regional action plan in which the provision of adjusted advocacy resources receives particular attention. A regional executive committee, called the Rights at Home Committee for Southeast Asia, comprising volunteers from Malaysia (Sisters in Islam), Indonesia (Ulil Abshar-Abdaila), the Philippines (Yasmin Busran-Lao), Singapore (Mariam Ali), and Thailand (Airin Sa'idi), was formed to spearhead the implementation of this action plan.

One of the actions in the plan that will be taken into the next phase is the development of a website for an Islamic discourse on human rights. The aim of this Rights at Home website is to make easily accessible selected information from a wide range of sources – from articles, training manuals, guides, theory, methodology, position papers, books, and case law to a forum focusing on human rights within a progressive Islamic framework – with particular attention to the rights of women and children. In this way the website will not only provide powerful advocacy resources for community-based organizations, NGOs, grassroots activists, and individuals, but will constitute in itself a way to intensify their networking, lobbying, and mutual aid activities.

Another activity proposed is taking human rights messages right to the homes of Islamic families. Popular media, like television dramas, comics, novels, political literature, and syndicated newspaper columns can be utilized to this end. The host organization in Malaysia, Sisters in Islam, for example, has experience in this field: it published easy-to-read, low budget booklets in question-and-answer format, illustrated with cartoons.



Cassandra Balchin, Norani Othman, Zainah Anwar, and Farish Noor at the Sounding Board Meeting.

ulama, social welfare officers, teachers, lawyers, and children's rights advocates, to discuss themes related to Rights at Home from different perspectives, and to jointly explore strategies and activities to promote the positions of Muslim women and children.

In the first sessions, presentations by participants from the Southeast Asian region aimed at giving a general impression of the situation of women's and children's rights in their respective countries. Those presentations were enlivened more than once by anecdotes of personal experiences with gender and power relations in the family, at school, at work, and in public areas like the *shari'a* courts. The discussions that followed did not only elaborate on the factors in culture, religion, and upbringing that curtail women's and children's rights in the different Islamic settings.

Sharifa Zuriah Aljeffri, member of Sisters in Islam, coordinated the organization of the Sounding Board Meeting in Malaysia. More information about the NGO Sisters in Islam can be found on their website (www.sistersinislam.org.my).

Mariëtte van Beek is administrative coordinator of the Rights at Home Project. More information about the project and the current composition of its project team can be found on the projects section of the ISIM website.