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Media Can Serve As Bridge Between Cultures And Societies

From Tengku Noor Shamsiah

JAKARTA, Nov 11 (Bernama) -- Media in all forms can potentially serve as a bridge between cultures and societies, Former Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said.

He said the often stated goal of the media was to inform and educate readers and viewers.

"Yet primarily because of the strong pressure exerted by practical politics and market forces in today's world, the production of quality news and programming that present a balanced portrayal of foreign cultures was hampered," he said in his address at the opening of the Asia-Pacific Regional Media Programme here Tuesday.

The programme, held from today until Nov 13 with the theme "Journalism at the Intersection of Politics, Religion and Culture", was endorsed by the East Asia Summit (EAS) and organised by the New Zealand government.

It is sponsored by the European Union and the Norwegian government and supported by the Indonesian government and the Indonesian Press Council.

A separate one-day interactive workshop organised by the Alliance of Civilizations Secretariat and Search for Common Ground non-governmental organisation will follow the programme on Nov 13-14.

Also present were New Zealand Ambassador to Indonesia Philip Gibson and EU Ambassador Julian Wilson.

According to Alatas, "We have to admit that journalism in many countries lack press freedom."

"Where such freedom exists, the influence of politics and market forces often result in the irresponsible practice of these freedoms. Only objective reporting and the presentation of diverse perspectives can prevent stereotypes and misinterpretation," he said.

He said increased access of Muslim populations to news produced by Muslim sources had raised popular awareness of events in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the West, he said, a more nationalistic, and at times anti-Muslim tone, had become more evident in news and commentaries, especially since September 11.

Accompanying this trend, Alatas said, was the advent of the "new media".

"The Internet and the development of digital media production and distribution have opened new fields for media consumers and have vastly increased people-to-people communication," he said.

He said the power of words and images "in shaping our understanding and view of the world cannot be overestimated."

"Concrete measures need to be taken to ensure accurate, balanced and responsible reporting," he said.

Alatas said the measures could include the development and implementation of a voluntary code of conduct by media professionals.

He said more resources from public and private donors should be channelled to the production of media materials aimed at cultivating positive social attitudes between cultures.

Alatas said it could also include the development of training programmes designed to enhance the capability of media to inform the public accurately and in a balanced way on topics where politics and religion intersect.

He said the production of television programmes, films and other electronic media materials aimed at improving mutual understanding between different cultures should also be encouraged to enhance respects towards diversity.

This might not solve every crisis caused by ignorance, prejudice and misunderstanding between faiths, cultures and civilisation "but they will greatly help in making these problems more manageable," he said.

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