

Muslims urged to 'stand for peace'

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KUALA LUMPUR: Muslims must project an image of peace if they are not to affirm Western prejudices against Islam, religious scholar Karen Armstrong said.

"By showing that Muslims are peaceful, it does not mean that they are being feeble or pushovers for the West," she said in her address at an international conference here yesterday.

The conference on "Islam and the West: Bridging the Gap" was organised by Wisma Putra's Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

"It, in fact, takes great strength to stand for peace in a world which has become increasingly violent. It is an internal challenge for Muslims against the bigotries of the West."

Armstrong added that Islamophobia was "very much current" in the Western world.

"Prejudice against Islam, however, is not a new concept.



Karen Armstrong is renowned for her work on Islam and fundamentalism

It existed way before Sept 11, 2001, having had its genesis in the 12th century Christian crusades against the Muslim world.

"That was when myths concerning Islam originated, that Islam was an inherently vio-

lent religion born by the sword, which is untrue."

"The spirit of Islam is one of compassion and peace, so it is important that those who hate violence yet also wish to protect their religion, are heard," said Armstrong.

Unfortunately, incidents such as the Sept 11 attacks in the US and the July 7, 2005 bombings in London served to reinforce the stereotypes of Muslims.

"These acts, clearly by extremists, should not be seen as being condoned by all Muslims.

"The bigger problem is that such acts 'feed' the other side. Each side, both extremist Muslim and the prejudiced West, is driven by each other's responses," she said in her keynote speech on "The External and Internal Challenges of Islam".

Since Sept 11, Armstrong has been renowned for her work on Islam and fundamen-

talism.

She has written many books on religion, including *Holy War*, *The Crusades and their Impact, on Today's World*, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* and *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis*.

In her speech, Armstrong said both Muslims and the West needed to listen to each other.

"In this fragmented world, we have to learn to listen.

"The West has to listen to the pain behind much of the Muslim discourse, Muslims too, need to listen to what the West is saying.

"The Muslim world cannot retreat behind barricades. It must instead be confident behind the great tradition of Islam and always speak of peace in our violent world," she said.

Armstrong will also be presenting a public lecture on "The Role of Religion in the 21st Century" today.