

Reaching out to the Cham

Written by Don Weinland and Kong Meta
Monday, 29 August 2011 15:02



Photo by: Don Weinland Members of Cambodia's Muslim community pray during a breaking of the Ramadan fast dinner at the US Embassy in Phnom Penh on Friday.

More than 100 members of Cambodia's 400,000-strong Cham community, a Muslim ethnic minority, broke their Ramadan fast at the US embassy on Phnom Penh late on Friday.

On traditional rugs in an empty room at the US Embassy in Phnom Penh, they knelt and prayed in the waning light.

The annual event is aimed at engaging the minority group and encouraging religious diversity, according to a statement from the embassy.

Such dinners are also part of the embassy's attempt to understand and reduce extremism among the region's Muslims, according to leaked diplomatic cables.

The US-sponsored dinners have fostered understand between the US and the Cham, said Sok Musean, head of Islamic Affairs at the Ministry of Cults and Religion. "It makes it easy to connect with the Muslim community," he said

The dinner is one of the biggest Ramadan celebrations in the country, Sok Musean said. Such events would not be possible without US support, he added. More than 200 members of the Cham community also took part in a US-hosted dinner on August 19 in Kampong Cham, according to the embassy. The United States first hosted breaking of the fast, or Iftar, dinners in 2003 in Cambodia. Ramadan began on August 1 and ends tomorrow.

Nat Yopbu, a 24-year-old Cham teacher who attended Friday's dinner, said relations between Cambodia's Muslims and the United States are healthy, but that hasn't always been the case. "The relationship between the US Embassy and the Cham Community is good now ... but when

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America attacked Iraq, the Cham were also angry at America,” Nat Yopbu, who teaches English at a Cham School, said.

The reported torture of Muslims at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq soured sentiment toward the United States among Cambodia’s Cham, he said.

The US government has long been concerned with Muslim extremism in Cambodia, according to diplomatic cables leaked last month by Wikileaks.

One cable dated January 5, 2010 called the Kingdom’s Cham “vulnerable” and questioned the Cambodian government’s power to recognise extremism despite recent efforts to curb it. “Gaps still exist in the [Royal Government of Cambodia’s] ability to identify and counter unpredictable yet urgent threats,” the cable states.

Suspected extremist organisations such as the Revival of Islamic Heritage and the World Assembly for Muslim Youth are known to disseminate aid and radical ideology to the country’s often impoverished and undereducated Muslims, according to the leaked cable.

A “culture of corruption and limited ability to maintain law and order” leaves Cambodia at risk for extremism and terrorism, the cable states.

America, Australia and the European Union had led successful campaigns against terrorism in Southeast Asia, Rohan Gunaratna, chair of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University, said.

Yet their attempts to mitigate extremism – a precursor to terrorism – had been less successful, he said.

“The threat of ideological extremism is growing because governments are only building counter-terrorism capabilities and not counter-extremism platforms to engage the communities,” Gunaratna said.

Although Southeast Asia’s Muslims tend to be moderate, Islamic teachers from the Middle East, some with ties to terrorist organisations, had attempted to politicise and radicalise Islam in the region, Gunaratna said.

Coupled with a lack of understanding and political will, Southeast Asia remained at risk for a rise in extremism, he said.

Hambali, the mastermind of the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia, was arrested in Thailand shortly after living in a Cham school in 2002 and 2003. The arrest came as a wake-up call to Cambodian authorities, according to the leaked cable.

Sok Arusat, a senior member of Cambodia’s Muslim community, said the Cham were not inclined towards terrorist activities because they suffered greatly during the Pol Pot regime and seek only to live peaceful lives.

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In recent years, exchanges between the US embassy and the Cham community had not all been at the US's invitation, Sok Arusat said. Cham were actively in engaging US officials, he said.

"When there is an open ceremony, we always invite people from the US embassy to be our guests," Sok Arusat said.