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Muslim students invite pope to Bali conference

by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Leaders of Indonesia's largest Muslim student group came to the Vatican to extend an invitation to Pope Benedict XVI to speak at a conference in Bali in 2012.

The leaders of the Indonesian Islamic Student Association, or Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam, met Sept. 10 with Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, reported Fides, the Vatican's missionary news agency.

The student association, which counts about 1 million members, was founded in 1947 and is "the oldest, largest and most influential" student group in Indonesia, Fides said.

In addition to inviting the pope to address their conference on dialogue and peace, Fides said, the students spoke to Cardinal Tauran about ways to promote dialogue and religious pluralism and to begin forms of collaboration with Catholics.

Fides said the visit of the association's president, Noer Fajrieansyah, and other members of its executive board demonstrated how the organization has returned to being a force promoting dialogue and interreligious harmony and for combating extremism.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Fides said, the organization "vigorously protested the U.S. bombing and military intervention in Afghanistan" and rejected claims that radical Islamic groups in Indonesia had ties to al-Qaida. The organization's president and another leader "were even arrested for burning the American flag," Fides said.

The Jakarta Post reported Sept. 11 that the organization's leaders also gave Cardinal Tauran information about how politicians in West Java have been manipulating religion for political gain.

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