

'Love for all, hatred for none' as 30,000 Ahmadi Muslims gather at farm

FOLLOWING 7/7 and the current conflict in the Middle East, religious intolerance and ensuring ignorance has perhaps never been so pertinent.

With this in mind, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community extended a welcoming hand to MPs, local dignitaries and neighbours to attend its 40th annual convention, or Jalsa Salana, at a 208-acre farm site in East Worthing last weekend.

Previously held at Tilford's Islamabad Centre and Aldershot's Rushmoor Arena, the event was billed as a "truly unique experience" with firm emphasis placed upon education, religious reinvigoration and ultimately peace.

With the slogan "Love for all, hatred for none" setting the agenda, Ahmadi Muslims travelled from across the globe to attend the event, which was also being beamed by satellite to an estimated 100 million people.

By Peter Carline and Fergus McEwan

First things first, what does an Ahmadi Muslim believe?

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Association UK forms part of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Community in Islam, which claims to have more than 178 offices, and in excess of 200 million followers worldwide. Founded in India in 1889 by Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, the movement claims to represent a latter-day renaissance of Islam, with followers wholly devoted to God and the Seal of the Prophets Muhammad.

On divine revelation, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad claimed to be the Promised Reformer, whose advent was awaited by all great religions of the world.

The current head of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim community Hadhrat Mirza Nasroor Ahmad, Khalifatul

Masih V, is the great grandson of the Promised Messiah. In 1977, he dedicated his life to Islam and the community look to the community as their spiritual leader for guidance and leadership in matters of faith.

While sharing the five tenets of Islam (a belief in one God and his prophet Muhammad, prayer, fasting during the week of Ramadan, the giving of alms and a commitment to Hajj), several nations - including Pakistan, Egypt and the UAE - have declared Ahmadi to be non-Muslims. Indeed, in 1974, Pakistan amended its constitution, defining a Muslim "as a person who believes in finality of Prophet Muhammad" with Ahmadi Muslims regularly suffering religious persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

The Main Event
Billed as a rejuvenating experience, it is the aim of Jalsa Salana to "assist participants with a revival of their faith, bonding them together under one humanity and providing an opportunity for members and guests to foster a better understanding of Islam".

"The whole thing is religious training," said Nasim Malik - a genial fellow who happens to have been elected first reserve member of the Swedish Parliament while occupying a seat on Kalmar County Council for the Social Democrat Party.

"It is to rejuvenate your religious training - if you have become lax over the year it is to re-engage and return our people to peak condition.

"Our religion requires quite a lot of discipline. We pray five times a day and this is a difficult thing to do, especially when you are living in a western society. You are being drawn at other things, aren't you?" he said.

With Hadhrat Mirza Nasroor Ahmad set to address attendees, the event was always going to be popular, particularly among the UK's 20,000 members. Indeed, with an estimated 30,000 people due to attend, several locals raised concerns about the infrastructure of a rural location in East Hampshire.

However, upon arrival on Saturday, the immediate area was remarkably discreet, with a decidedly normal level of traffic on the A31, and minimal

queues into the farm. Indeed, Sergeant Ian Dugdale, of Hampshire Police, commented that the organisation of the event was "absolutely amazing".

Usually when combining the hot summer sun, England's green and pleasant land and a seemingly never-ending array of tents, you could be forgiven for expecting the odd strobe light and several casualties of excess. Not a bit of it, as the peaceful crowd made their way in between talks, prayer sessions and mass feeding.

"One incredible thing about our site," said international press officer Asif Nasser, "is that the police often come here but they never see any trouble. There is no alcohol on our site, no fighting - absolutely no kind of a disturbance. It's not like a football match, despite there being 30,000 people here."

"We as a community are following the real and pure Islam, which does not reject the truth of other faiths. We are preaching peace to the hard-hearted Muslims of today. It's all about good morals, good manners and becoming good people. The emphasis is entirely on peace, and the whole point is religious training."

Meanwhile, Dr Basharat Ahmad Nazir, head of press and media of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association UK, spoke openly about the fear of terrorism.

"The crowd here is roughly half male and half female and we put an emphasis on equal access to education for men and women. Our leader talked to the women earlier about raising the next generation of truly enlightened Muslims who will be totally against terrorist activities."

"He also spoke of being loyal British citizens; this does not mean blindly following an administration, but using the proper channels to bring about change. We do not want there to be a situation where our children could be thinking of committing a terrorist act and their parents do not even know about it. If you look around you, every generation is here - it is especially important to educate the next generation."

Faith, Hope and Charity
Key to Ahmadi is the principle of zakah, or the giving of alms, and Humanity First is one

of the global charities supported by the Ahmadi Community. The organisation - manned entirely by volunteers - delivers food, shelter and medical aid to 19 countries on a regular basis. Chairman Ahmad Sayed was on hand to describe the charity's work and its ethos.

"Our community supports charities on a non-political basis. The agenda is humanity, and nothing else. Our charity does not discriminate between Muslims and non-Muslims but gives aid to everyone in need."

"We were the first charity to respond to the Pakistan earthquake, and that was one of the largest disaster-relief packages we have done. Last year, our volunteers devoted half a million man hours to projects."

"We are also concerned with educating youths in West Africa, running more than 20 IT skill centres free of charge. We support this by sending computers and equipment that has been made redundant in the UK, and we have also constructed a school in The Gambia. Over the last two years 1,500 students have graduated, and we hope to have increased their opportunity and helped to recognise their potential."

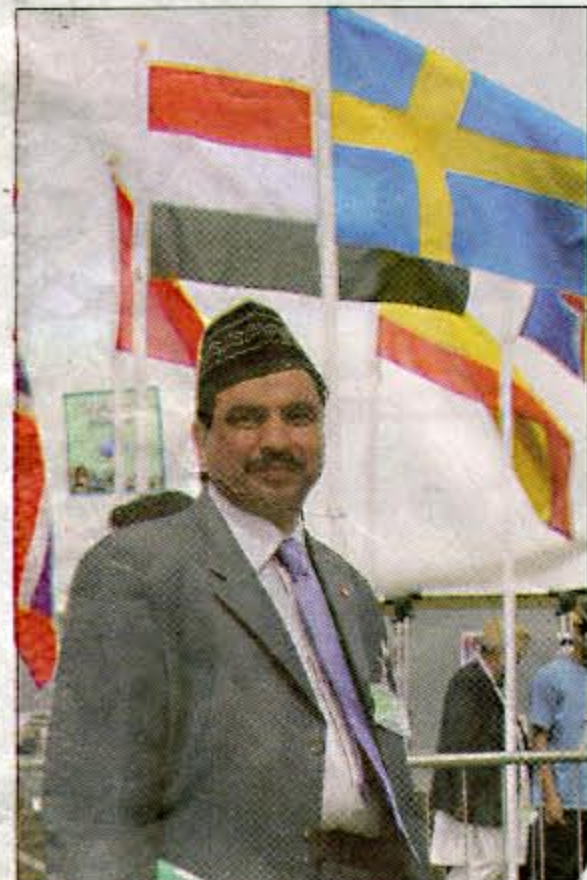
"Because 98 per cent of our staff are volunteers, that gives us extra to spend in the field. That's the strength of our organisation - 93 per cent of our funds go into the field," he added.

Yet my strength was dwindling due to a lack of sustenance - a situation quickly remedied by a rather wonderful meal in the company of young Ahmadi. With conversation ranging from football to the current situation in Lebanon, to suicide bombers and Christianity, it struck me that the Ahmadi community - while not forcing any issue - is open, friendly, efficient and incredibly polite.

"We are not a completely closed door," concurred Mr Nasser. "We want to welcome people and integrate with them. Our own members have a right to be here, but others can come as guests and they are welcome to learn about us. We are the most peaceful Muslim community in the world."



Despite the large numbers attending the event, police were full of praise for the way it was organised. Above: AD31-40-06. Below: AD31-36-06.



First reserve member of the Swedish Parliament Nasim Malik in front of his country's flag (AD31-37-06).



Pictured, from left, are first reserve member of the Swedish Parliament Nasim Malik, Asif Nasser of the International Press Office, chairman of Humanity First Ahmad Sayed, director of Humanity First Sultan Lone and Mudassar Ahmed of the International Press Office (AD31-39-06).