Forum probes causes of Muslim anger

A SENSE of besiegement is what's fuelling the Muslim world's strong reactions to religious issues, panellists at a peace forum said on Thursday.

They pointed out that Muslims have been portrayed unfavourably in the Western media and many of them are also upset by what they perceive to be "uneven-handed" Middle East policies from Western countries, such as the United States.

This was one reason why the recent comments by Pope Benedict and the Danish cartoons depicting Prophet Mohammed a year ago sparked anger in many Muslims, the panellists said.

In response to what can be done to curb such strong responses, National University of Singapore's sociology professor, Mr Syed Farid Alatas, said: "The community should not allow profligates to dominate the response. It must ensure that cool and rational leaders are the ones who answer."

Professor Alatas and five other panellists from different faiths including Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, were speaking at a forum to discuss the role of religion in today's world.

The inaugural event was organised by Singapore Management University to commemorate the International Day of Peace established by the United Nations 20 years ago.

While other panellists pointed out that some politicians around the world have "manipulated" religion for political gains, widening the rift between different faiths, another panelist, Mr Yang Razali Kassim, a Senior Fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, highlighted the Singapore government's sensitive approach towards religious issues.

"Singapore is getting closer to Middle Eastern countries and it's not just for economic reasons. It is also a signal that Singapore is not following the US blindly (in terms of foreign policy)," Mr Kassim said.

— NG HUN WEI