

Leaders must speak up

IF A religious leader makes an offensive comment, other leaders of the same faith should speak up and rebut him or her, said Minister of Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan yesterday.

He said: "If each religious leader takes it upon himself to do good housekeeping, to rebut and explain that those are not the views of the mainstream of that religion, I think other religions, other people listening will feel more reassured."

It also avoids a clash if religious leaders from another faith join in the fray, he added.

The minister was addressing about 300 participants of the National Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC) workshop yesterday, where he also launched the IRCC website.

He did not name anyone in particular, but the Internal Security Department had called up Lighthouse Evangelism church pastor Rony Tan last month for remarks disparaging certain beliefs associated with Buddhism and Taoism.

Dr Balakrishnan added that the growth

of the Internet poses new challenges for the maintenance of peace and harmony, as information is received, uploaded and shared instantaneously.

Many terrorist, racist or xenophobic groups also use the Internet to amplify their messages and radicalise vulnerable individuals, the minister said.

Said Dr Balakrishnan: "Now when you have Internet and cyberspace, people will want to talk, and people will say even more when they think they are anonymous."

One scenario discussed was the challenges IRCCs would face if race riots were to happen in this age of connectivity.

Dr Balakrishnan said it is likely tensions in a localised incident would escalate quickly as information, especially unchecked rumours, go viral.

And that is where the IRCC website will be useful to counter challenges posed by new media. He urged IRCCs to use the website to monitor ground sentiments and disseminate information effectively.

The website will be a rich resource, capturing milestones and information on inter-racial events, while receiving feedback on issues.