

Political tensions mark 9/11 anniversary

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The ninth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was observed with prayers and services of remembrance, but also with demonstrations and arguments over plans for an Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York. Adding to the tensions was uncertainty about the activities of a Florida pastor, who before changing his mind on September 9 planned to burn copies of the Qur'an on the 9/11 anniversary—a plan that sparked a media frenzy and criticism from around the world.

Terry Jones, pastor of the Dove World Outreach Center, a church of 50 members in Gainesville, postponed his bonfire plans, saying that a Florida Muslim leader had helped broker a deal with the man behind the proposed Islamic center, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf Rauf, to relocate the center farther from Ground Zero. But Rauf and Imam Muhammad Musri of the Islamic Society of Central Florida both said that no deal had been made.

Rauf said in a statement to the Associated Press said that he had no plans to meet with Jones. "Our plans for the community center have not changed." Rauf said he was open to meeting, however, "with anyone who is seriously committed to pursuing peace."

"We are not going to toy with our religion or any other. Nor are we going to barter. We are here to extend our hands to build peace and harmony," Rauf said. He later commented that the center project could be delayed as a means of cooling down the uproar it provoked.

Jones's plans sparked violent protests in Afghanistan and criticism from leaders worldwide, including the Vatican and President Obama.

Obama said the proposed Qur'an bonfire "threatens our men and women in uniform" and serves as a "recruiting tool" for Muslim extremists. "You don't play games with

that," the president said. Burning the Qur'an also contradicts the American ideal of tolerance for all religions, Obama said. "The idea that we would burn the sacred texts of someone else's religion is contrary to what this country stands for."

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called Jones to dissuade him from the plan.

According to international reports, at least two people were killed in protests in Afghanistan, and the State Department issued a travel alert advising Americans abroad to "avoid areas where demonstrations may be taking place."

A statement from the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue called Jones's plan "an outrageous and grave gesture against a book considered sacred by a religious community."

Archbishop Wilton Gregory, chair of the U.S. Catholic bishops' interreligious committee, said, "All acts of intolerance aimed at a religious community should find no place in our world, let alone in our nation, which is founded on the principle of religious freedom."

Meanwhile, a church in Germany founded by Jones said it has had nothing to do with the preacher since 2008 and denounced him as "violent and fanatical."

In the 1980s, Jones formed the Christian Community of Cologne, a charismatic church in a heavily Catholic part of Germany that, at one point, claimed 800 members, reported dpa, the German Press Agency. However, Jones was ousted from the church in 2008 over financial irregularities and personality clashes, according to the report. The church now has between 60 and 80 members.

"We are distancing ourselves from these actions and don't want to be connected to them," Stephan Baar, a church official, told dpa.

Dpa cited church members who said Jones tried to run the Cologne church like a sect leader and applied psychological pressure on its members, subordinating all activities to his will.

In 2002, Jones was fined 3,000 euros by a German court for using the title of "doctor" under false pretenses. Members also said he was at the center of some financial improprieties. Since his departure in 2008, the congregation has had no contact with Jones.

Saying Jones is capable of "fanaticism," Baar expressed doubt that international pressure would get the pastor to deviate from his Qur'an-burning plans. "Terry Jones is the kind of person who sees things through, if he thinks it's a task given him by God," Baar said.

The *New York Times* reported that the 9/11 anniversary observance in New York was accompanied by some political posters and protesters, even as many participants sought to exclude politics from the day. The Times said police officers and barricades separated demonstrations, both for and against the Muslim center, which drew about 2,000 people each.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told guests at a dinner in observance of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan that Jones's proposal was "disrespectful and disgraceful." Speaking to a group of religious leaders, Attorney General Eric Holder called the idea "idiotic and dangerous."

New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, a prominent supporter of plans for the Muslim center near the former site of the World Trade Center, called burning the Qur'an a "distasteful" act that is nonetheless protected by the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech. —RNS