

Religious leaders call for calm, civility

by [Daniel Burke](#)

January 10, 2011

(RNS) Tucson Bishop Gerald Kicanas was thousands of miles away from the shooting rampage that rocked his Arizona diocese on Saturday (Jan. 8), but the emotional shock hit him hard.

"It broke me up," said Kicanas, who was in Jerusalem attending a meeting of Catholic bishops on peace in the Holy Land. "I could not sleep. I just wanted to return home as soon as possible," the bishop wrote to his spokesman.

The victims of Saturday's shooting include a federal judge and devout Roman Catholic who attended Mass daily, and a 9-year-old girl who had received her First Communion at St. Odilia Parish in Tucson last year. Four other victims died and 14 were wounded, including Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., who police believe was the target of accused gunman Jared Lee Loughner.

After news of the shooting broke, Kicanas said Catholics in Jericho asked how to prevent further brutality. "I wish I knew the answer," the bishop said.

"But as the world continues to seek an answer to that question, we can, each in our own way, strive to respect others, speak with civility, try to understand one another and to find healthy ways to resolve our conflicts."

Religious leaders across the country offered similar sentiments on Monday, balancing lamentations about the dire state of political dialogue in the U.S. with cautions that Loughner's motives remain murky.

"While we as bishops are also concerned about the wider implications of the Tucson incident, we caution against drawing any hasty conclusions about the motives of the assailant until we know more from law enforcement authorities," said New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Giffords, a member of a Reform Jewish congregation in Tucson, is a moderate Democrat who supported the health care reform bill and opposed Arizona's new illegal immigration law, both stances that drew heat from conservatives.

Sarah Palin's political action committee depicted Giffords' congressional district in crosshairs, and the congresswoman's Tucson office was vandalized after the health care bill passed last year.

Giffords, like the other victims, was shot at close range at a constituent event at a Tucson shopping plaza; she remains in critical condition.

It is unclear, though, whether Loughner was motivated by partisan politics. In a video posted on YouTube, the 22-year-old rails against government conspiracies to brainwash Americans through grammar and rants nonsensically about currency. Loughner's former philosophy professor described him to Slate magazine as "someone whose brains were scrambled."

Even though the accused shooter's intentions are unknown, Americans cannot ignore the country's increasing culture of violence, particularly in political discourse, said Rabbi David Saperstein, whose Reform Action Center of Reform Judaism has worked closely with Giffords.

"Dehumanizing language and images of violence are regularly used to express differences of opinion on political issues," Saperstein said. "Such language is too often heard by others, including those who may be mentally ill or ideologically extreme, to justify the actual use of violence."

Four out of five Americans share Saperstein's concerns, according to a November PRRI/Religion News poll, saying that a lack of respectful political discourse in the U.S. is a serious problem.

Some Christian leaders also said the shooting shows the need for stricter gun-control laws.

"Death and suffering from guns -- legally and illegally attained -- is virtually a daily occurrence in the cities and villages of this country," said the Rev. Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the

National Council of Churches.

"Surely the Second Amendment was not intended to provide indiscriminate access to guns without more effective vetting and control," he added.

The Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, said he was "angered" by Saturday's shooting.

"Ours is a society in which such acts occur far too often," Morales said. "Sorrow and compassion when people are murdered are not enough. We must rededicate ourselves to creating a culture where differences are resolved without violence, where the mentally unstable do not have ready access to lethal force."

Rabbi Steve Gutow, president and CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, said a lack of respect for human dignity -- political opponents included -- underlies society's incivility problem. "It's a failure to understand, from the perspective of the Abrahamic faiths, that we are all made in God's image," Gutow said. "There is a real problem in our society when things like that happen."

A number of religious scholars and leaders urged politicians to weigh their words carefully and recognize the potential consequences of using violent imagery.

"No one questions the power of well-chosen words and images to sell automobiles or beer or pharmaceuticals," said the Rev. Bob Edgar, president of Common Cause, a good-government group based in Washington, and former general secretary of the NCC.

"Surely we should acknowledge that when poorly chosen they can provoke despicable acts like those we've now witnessed in Tucson."