

U.S. Muslims, Copts appeal to rioters to drop violence

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Muslim and Coptic Christian leaders in the U.S. are pledging not to let a spate of violent protests in some 20 Islamic countries derail recent efforts to improve the sometimes troubled relations between the two communities.

On Tuesday (Sept. 18), the Egyptian government ordered the arrest of seven Egyptian-born Copts now living in the United States who were allegedly involved in an anti-Muslim film that portrayed Islam's Prophet Muhammad as a bumbling sexual pervert.

"We cannot allow the actions of a few deceived fanatical individuals to define our communities," said Bishop Serapion, head of the Los Angeles Diocese of the Coptic Orthodox Church, speaking during a press conference on Monday (Sep. 17) with Muslim leaders in Los Angeles.

"We call on members of both religions to lean on our faiths to counter the hate and the violence with good speech and positive work," added the Egyptian-born bishop.

The show of solidarity comes almost a week after protesters in Egypt, where about 10 percent of the 90 million Egyptians are Coptic, attacked the U.S. embassy, setting off protests in other Muslim countries, including neighboring Libya, where American ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

"These people are not Muslims or Copts," said Salam Al-Marayati, president of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, an advocacy group in Los Angeles. He added: "We've known each other for many years. The vast majority of our two communities, I don't think there's any animosity there."

The recent violence, set against a backdrop of continuing safety concerns for minority Coptic Christians in Muslim-majority Egypt, has tested efforts between the

two sides to work together to overcome a history of discrimination abroad and mutual suspicion at home.

In a letter last month to the new Egyptian government in Cairo, a group of Muslim imams and Coptic priests urged Egyptian leaders drafting the country's constitution to "reject any language that would discriminate against any citizen of Egypt on the basis of that citizen's religion or gender."

"Both communities have been making a determined effort not to let this hate and violence set them back," said Jim Zogby, president of the Washington-based Arab American Institute, which sponsored the August 7 letter.

"There are extremists on both sides, and there's a lot of building to be done. But all the progress that's been made won't be reversed by one provocateur in California or by a mob of angry, alienated young people spurred on by extremists in Cairo."