

Plan to burn Quran in Florida draws international condemnation

WASHINGTON – A small Florida Protestant church's plan to burn copies of the Quran has drawn international condemnation.

The head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Indonesian religious leaders – including two Catholic bishops – and the bishop of St. Augustine, Fla., are among a growing group of faith leaders who have condemned the planned action by the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Fla.

The announcement of the planned burning by the 50-member church on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks has captured worldwide attention. The center's leaders said they intend to go ahead with the Quran burning despite being denied a burn permit by the city of Gainesville.

The comments from religious leaders came amid a debate about the construction of Islamic centers and mosques throughout the United States.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, said in a Sept. 1 statement that the plan by the Florida congregation is a "totally insensitive and disrespectful act toward the holy Quran," reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

"This was all the more shocking because such a campaign goes totally contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ," he said.

Christ's teachings stress respect for "all religions and all men and women" who sincerely seek God, he said. "All Christians are called to do likewise."

He said he "hoped and prayed" that better sense would prevail and the anti-Muslim program would be canceled.

In Indonesia Sept. 1, Bishop Petrus Mandagi of Amboina and Bishop Johannes Pujasumarta of Bandung met with the Islamic Defenders Front at the offices of the

Indonesian bishops' conference in Jakarta.

Christian, Buddhist, Confucian and Hindu leaders also attended the one-hour meeting.

"We are deeply hurt by this group's plan to harm a religious symbol which is highly respected by Islam," the Indonesian bishops said in a statement at the meeting. "We strongly denounce the plan and any similar action committed by any party elsewhere."

Rev. Andreas A. Yewangoe, chairman of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, told the gathering his organization was "worried, because the plan threatens relations between Christians and Muslims in various parts of the world and will stir hatred among Muslims against Christian congregations."

Habib Rizieq Shihab, chairman of the Islamic Defenders Front, welcomed the support from the bishops and the Christian churches.

"This is an opportunity for us to build dialogue," he said. "The (Islamic Defenders Front) appreciates this since it has done much to maintain harmony among religious communities, especially between Muslim and Christians in Indonesia."

He also called on Muslims in Indonesia not to overreact to the Quran burning plan and not to burn any book considered holy by another religion.

In Florida, Bishop Victor B. Galeone of St. Augustine wrote in a letter to the editor of the Gainesville Sun that Catholics should consider the plan by Dove center members "reprehensible."

"The burning of another faith tradition's sacred texts is diametrically opposed to the Catholic Church's ongoing commitment to improving interreligious relations," he said. "Furthermore, it represents a counter-witness to the Gospel message by engendering fear and hatred rather than the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves."