

Bishops blast Coptic Christians behind anti-Muslim film

Wire Services | Sep. 17, 2012

Image not found
<http://ncronline.org/sites/default/files/stories/images/oldimgs/middle%20east%20protests.jpg>

A protester stands in front of riot police in Cairo Sept. 13 during clashes over an anti-Islam film produced in the U.S. (CNS photo/Mohamed Abd El Ghany, Reuters)

Coptic Christian leaders in the United States distanced themselves from an anti-Muslim film that has sparked protests in more than 20 countries, and denounced the Copts who reportedly produced and promoted the film.

"We reject any allegation that the Coptic Orthodox community has contributed to the production of this film," the Coptic Orthodox Archdiocese of America said in statement Sept. 14. "Indeed, the producers of this film have taken these unwise and offensive actions independently and should be held responsible for their own actions."

Joseph Nassralla Abdelmasih, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula and Morris Sadek - all Coptic Christians who live in the U.S. - have emerged as the producers and promoters of the anti-Muslim film. Called "Innocence of Muslims," the crude film depicts Islam's Prophet Muhammad as a bumbling sexual pervert.

Protests against the film began in Egypt Sept. 11 and have since spread to nearly two dozen countries, including Libya, Yemen, Bangladesh, Sudan, Qatar, Kuwait, Indonesia and Iraq, according to international reports. Four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, were killed in Libya last Tuesday. The Obama administration is investigating whether that attack was tied to the film.

Joseph Nassralla, as he is known, heads a Christian charity, and Nakoula is a convicted felon. Both live near Los Angeles, according to reports. Sadek is an incendiary activist who lives near Washington. Coptic leaders said they are investigating what ties - if any - the men have to mainstream Copts in the United States.

There are about 300,000 Copts in the United States, most of whom live in California and the Northeast. Copts in Egypt, where the faith was born, regularly face discrimination and violence at the hands of the Muslim majority, according to the State Department.

Since the film is associated with the Christian West, Copts and other Christians in Muslim countries can become possible targets of extremist behavior.

"What happens outside the country is very dangerous for us because it is perceived to be related to us inside," said Bishop Adel Zaki of Alexandria, Egypt's vicar for Latin-rite Catholics.

The film was released in July but went almost completely unnoticed in the Middle East until a preview of it was translated into Arabic.

In an interview at his Cairo residence, Zaki told Catholic News Service that Egypt's Catholics condemned

defamation of other religions, in line with what he called "the Vatican decree which commands respect for those of other faiths."

But when products or policies deemed anti-Arab or anti-Muslim surface in the U.S. and in other Western countries, Egypt's Christians, who account for about 8 million of the country's more than 82 million people, often feel the brunt, he said.

People in other countries "should keep in mind that there are repercussions for Christians here. The level of fanaticism grows," he said.

Newly elected Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, a conservative Muslim, has decried the short film, saying "Egyptians reject any kind of insult against our Prophet," but he also called for restraint and protection of the country's "foreign guests" and embassies.

Despite the tension over the film in Cairo and other parts of the Middle East, Fr. Fady Sady, a Coptic Catholic priest, said he did not expect trouble in Egypt's South, where he lives and serves.

"(Muslims) know those who made the film are not from Egypt, so there will be no problems," he said by cell phone from the city of Nagada. But he added that "when anything contentious" like this film appears abroad, Christians in Egypt go on alert.

"Perhaps someone not very educated could use the event to make an operation," he said, referring to attacks on churches that have occurred in the past.

In Cairo, Mohammed Abdu, a 22-year-old Muslim taxi driver, said he was angered by reports of the film but even more upset by the protests at the U.S. Embassy, saying they would further damage Egypt's already challenged economy, due to dramatic losses in tourism and other business since the 2011 overthrow of former President Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian regime.

"Had (the protesters) been quiet and ignored (the film), it would have disappeared, but now it is famous. When people start climbing walls and attacking embassies, the people who made the film get the attention they wanted," said Abdu, who drives a rented cab 12 hours a day to save enough money to get married.

Internationally, religious leaders from across the spectrum were quick to condemn the hate message of the anti-Islam film and the wave of violent attack it supposedly provoked.

The Vatican condemned the attacks in Libya, saying there was no justification for such violence.

After protests in Pakistan gathered momentum, Catholic leaders in Faisalabad condemned the film. A church official said leaders hoped to avoid possible anti-Christian backlash.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders who work with religious institutions as well as heads of local churches issued a joint statement Sept. 15 deploring "those who abuse free speech to offend the religion and religious beliefs and symbols of others."

The leaders also condemned "those who use violence in reaction instead of peacefully protesting against such abuse."

Israeli Deputy Foreign Ministry spokesman Paul Hirschson told the Hebrew edition of Ha'aretz daily newspaper that the content of the film was "beneath contempt" and "vile."

Bishop Serapion of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California and Hawaii said he

"strongly rejects dragging the respectable Copts of the Diaspora" into the controversy.

"The producers of this movie should be responsible for their actions," Serapion said in a statement. "The name of our blessed parishioners should not be associated with the efforts of individuals who have ulterior motives."

(Reports from Religion News Service and Catholic News Service contributed to this story)

Source URL (retrieved on 12/21/2013 - 14:10): <http://ncronline.org/news/bishops-blast-coptic-christians-behind-anti-muslim-film>