

Caution from R.I. Muslim leader

01:00 AM EST on Friday, March 11, 2011

By Richard C. Dujardin

Journal Staff Writer

NORTH SMITHFIELD — Saying he has been watching the televised hearings by a U.S. House panel looking into radicalization in the Muslim community with keen interest, the imam of Rhode Island's largest Muslim house of worship said Thursday he thinks the panel should broaden its focus to include "all aspects of terrorism from all sides," not just Muslims.

"It's a good thing it's happening, but it should not single out Muslims," said Mufti Ikram Ul Haq, whose Masjid Al-Islam on Sayles Hill Road has between 100 and 150 families. "It will only feed into the hate that already exists in the minds of some people who think that Islam is evil."

The 27-year-old Ul Haq, who was raised primarily in Virginia though he was born in Pakistan, said he was encouraged Thursday to see that the overwhelming majority on the House Homeland Security panel, chaired by U.S. Rep. Peter King, also said that the hearings should be more broadly focused.

"The majority of Muslims in America are law-abiding, outstanding citizens who are contributing to the well-being and advancement of America," he said. Having hearings that seem to target Muslims, he said, could not only endanger the safety of American Muslims who could become targets of "crazy attacks," but also alienate them.

The North Smithfield imam offered his remarks Thursday just one day after he and a number of other Muslim leaders from several mosques and masjids, as well as Brown University's Muslim chaplain, met with federal and state law-enforcement officials at the invitation of Attorney General Peter F. Kilmartin. Others in attendance included U.S. Attorney Peter Neronha, members of the FBI, the Transportation Security Administration and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Although the Muslims have met with local law-enforcement officials before, Ul Haq said Wednesday's meeting was the most productive. He hopes it will continue monthly.

"As the community gets to know law enforcement on a personal basis and understands that they are not our enemies, but protecting us and working to keep this country safe, that will only enhance the relationship between Muslims and law enforcement," he said.

Ul Haq said everyone recognizes that in “every community there are bad apples.” But according to the government statistics, he said, more than 70 percent of the terrorist threats that have been made in this country since 9/11 have been from non-Muslims.

“To hold a hearing and to title it ‘the Radicalization of the Muslim Community and its Response,’ is not very useful because it only benefits those who want to spread hate. God forbid, if the hearing goes in the direction where people start demonizing Muslims and Islam, it could have a bad outcome.”

He said just a few weeks ago someone drove into the masjid’s parking lot on Sayles Hill Road and threw a beer bottle through the window, the first time the house of worship was ever vandalized.

rdujardi@projo.com