

Religious freedom envoy condemns religious intolerance

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GENEVA (RNS)—The Obama administration's new envoy for international religious freedom told a U.N. commission that government, political, religious and business leaders must stand ready to condemn hateful ideology.

Borrowing from recent headlines, Ambassador-at-Large Suzan Johnson Cook cited a Florida pastor who had been so "publicly reviled and rebuked" for threatening to burn a Quran that he has virtually no followers left.

The appearance before the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights was the first for Cook, a New York pastor who was recently sworn in after a long nomination battle during which critics questioned her credentials.

"Leaders who remain silent are contributing to the problem and should be held politically accountable," Cook said at a forum on "Combating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief."

Holding up the United States as an example, Cook said the U.S. Justice Department sought to fight and prevent "backlash" crimes and threats against people who were, or were perceived to be, Arab, Muslim, Sikh or South Asian after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

More than 700 bias-motivated incidents were investigated after 9/11, Cook said, resulting in 34 federal convictions and more than 160 local criminal prosecutions.

"President Obama has made clear that it is in the interest of security and stability worldwide to ensure fundamental freedoms for people of all

backgrounds and all faiths to understand that religious freedom is a universal human right," she said.

While noting the value of legal safeguards such as the U.N.'s Universal Declaration on Human Rights, she said creating a climate to avert violence and discrimination is better than trying to prosecute it "after the fact."

Cook credited former President George W. Bush for visiting a mosque just days after 9/11 in a bid to promote tolerance and to "counter efforts to blame all adherents of Islam for the actions of a violent extremist group."

She also noted near universal condemnation of Terry Jones, "an extremist pastor in Florida" who threatened to burn a Quran on the 9/11 anniversary, which set off deadly protests in Afghanistan and the wider Islamic world.

"His behavior is publicly reviled and rebuked by virtually the entire society," Cook said. "The result has been that you can count on your fingers the number of supporters Pastor Terry Jones has in our country."