

Mosque protests intensify

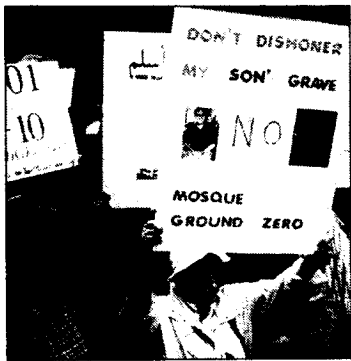
By Verena Dobnik
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

NEW YORK — The proposed mosque near ground zero drew hundreds of fever-pitch demonstrators Sunday, with opponents carrying signs associating Islam with blood, supporters shouting, "Say no to racist fear!" and American flags waving on both sides.

Police separated the two groups but there were some nose-to-nose confrontations, including a man and a woman screaming at each other across a barricade under a steady rain.

Opponents of the plan to build a \$100 million, 13-story Islamic center and mosque two blocks from the World Trade Center site appeared to outnumber supporters.

Signs hoisted by hundreds of protesters standing behind police barricades read "SHARIA" using dripping, blood-red letters to describe Islam's Shariah law. Around the corner, NYPD officers guarded a cordoned-off



Seth Wenig/Associated Press

Crowds gather to protest the mosque.

stretch of Park Place occupied by the old building that is to become the Islamic center.

Steve Ayling, a 40-year-old Brooklyn plumber, took his "SHARIA" sign to a dry spot by an office building.

He said the people behind the mosque project are "the same people who took down the twin towers."

On a nearby sidewalk, police chased away a group that unfurled a banner with images of

beating, stoning and other torture they said was committed by those who followed Islamic law.

The mosque project is being led by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his wife, Daisy Khan, who insist the center will promote moderate Islam.

At a pro-mosque rally staged a block away from opponents' demonstration, several hundred people chanted, "Muslims are welcome here! We say no to racist fear!"

The Sunday rallies coincided with an annual motorcycle ride by a group that raises money for Sept. 11 first responders. Bikers rolled in from the two other Sept. 11 attack sites, Washington and Shanksville, Pa.

The imam behind the project is in the middle of a Mideast trip funded by the U.S. State Department that is intended to promote religious tolerance.

He has discussed efforts to combat extremism, but has avoided any comments on the rancor over the planned Islamic center.



Maya Allenruzo/Associated Press

Troops depart from a casing ceremony marking the last combat brigade serving in Iraq. Officials say U.S. combat duties are unlikely to resume.

Return to Iraq unlikely for U.S. combat troops

By Lolita C. Baldor
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — It would take "a complete failure" of the Iraqi security forces for the U.S. to resume combat operations there, the top American commander in Iraq said as the final U.S. fighting forces prepared to leave the country.

With a major military milestone in sight, Gen. Ray Odierno said in interviews broadcast Sunday that any resumption of combat duties by American forces is unlikely.

"We don't see that happening," Odierno said. The Iraqi security forces have been doing "so well for so long now that we really believe we're beyond that point."

President Barack Obama plans a major speech on Iraq after his return to Washington, according to a senior administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity Sunday because details were being finalized.

About 50,000 U.S. troops will remain in the country until the end of 2011 to serve as a training and assistance force, a dramatic drawdown from the peak of more than 170,000 during the surge of American forces in 2007.

Obama will face a delicate balancing act in his speech between welcoming signs of progress and bringing an end to the 7-year-old war without prematurely declaring the mission accomplished, as former President George W. Bush once did.

U.S. involvement in Iraq beyond the end of 2011, Odierno said, probably would involve assisting the Iraqis secure their airspace and borders.

He said Iraq's security forces

have matured to the point where they will be ready to shoulder enough of the burden to permit the remaining 50,000 soldiers to go home at the end of next year.

On Thursday, the 4th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division began crossing the border from Iraq into Kuwait, becoming the last combat brigade to leave Iraq.

Its exodus, along with that of the approximately 2,000 remaining U.S. combat forces destined to leave in the coming days, fulfills Obama's pledge to end combat operations in Iraq by Aug. 31.

In interviews with CBS' "Face the Nation" and CNN's "State of the Union," Odierno said it may take several years before America can determine if the war was a success.

"A strong democratic Iraq will bring stability to the Middle East, and if we see Iraq that's moving toward that, two, three, five years from now, I think we can call our operations a success," he said.

Much of that may hinge on whether Iraq's political leaders can overcome ethnic divisions and work toward a more unified government, while also enabling security forces to tamp down a simmering insurgency.

Iraq's political parties have been bickering for over five months since the March parliamentary elections failed to produce a clear winner on both party sides. They have yet to reach agreements on how to share power or whether to replace embattled Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and amid the political instability, other economic and governmental problems fester and continue to plague the country.

Obama vacations under careful watch

By Glen Johnson
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

VINEYARD HAVEN, Mass. — President Barack Obama had a simple task for his first morning on vacation: shoot over to a Martha's Vineyard bookstore to fill out his daughters' summer reading list and grab himself a novel.

Easier said than done. His SUV, part of a 20-vehicle motorcade, passed through a cordon of Massachusetts State Police motorcycle officers, in a protective cocoon of Secret Service agents.

Tagging along for the quick trip Friday were White House communications trucks, an ambulance and two vans full of reporters and photographers.

It was the same drill Saturday when he went to the beach for a picnic lunch with his family.

This may be down time for Obama, but like all modern presidents, celebrities and some wannabes, he must move about with a not-insignificant entourage. It includes security officers and their array of arms, as well as advisers, friends in and out of politics, and a cook who doubles as a golfing buddy.

"They all have it and they all hate it," said Ron Kaufman, political director for former President George H.W. Bush. "Every president that I know has been accused of taking off too much time and ignoring the responsibilities of their job. But the truth is, they never get away from it."

Mike McCurry, press secretary for former President Bill Clinton, said: "It is literally true that ever since World War II, the president can be commander in chief wherever he goes. That's why you have that communications truck go everywhere he goes."

Obama aides said before the Massachusetts trip that the president would travel light, with a skeleton staff.

Accompanying him on Air Force One were senior adviser Valerie Jarrett and his counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan.

When they landed on Cape Cod, Obama transferred to Marine One, the presidential helicopter, while his staff and reporters raced to a pair of Marine Corps CH-53 helicopters. Other Blackhawk helicopters, painted identical to Marine One, flew with Obama's as decoy aircraft.



Carolyn Kaster/Associated Press

President Barack Obama exits a shop with his daughters Friday.

A State Police chopper swept over the route to Martha's Vineyard Airport before the president passed overhead.

Brennan, who said he wanted to give the president his space while on vacation, briefed Obama on national security issues during the first day on the trip.

Brennan also said he would rely on the phone and presidential BlackBerry to provide other updates not requiring a visit to Blue Heron Farm, the 30-acre property the Obama family was using for the second consecutive year.

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