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London bombings highlight failings in UK mosques

By Gideon Long

LUTON, England, July 20 (Reuters) - Mohammed Rashid would like to employ a British-born imam in his mosque in this southern English town, but limited resources and a shortage of candidates mean he has to recruit from abroad.

"It's a problem, there's no doubt about it," said Rashid, president of the Central Mosque in Luton, whose 35,000 Muslim inhabitants have come under close scrutiny since the July 7 bombings in nearby London.

Luton has had a reputation as a breeding ground for radical Islamism since 2001, when a handful of Muslims from the town were killed while fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan.

One of the London bombers lived near the town and it was from here that the four men took a train to London to launch their attacks.

"We can't afford to pay our imam more than 300 pounds (\$520) a week," Rashid explained as he stood in front of the mosque's well-kept, red brick facade, decorated with colourful flower baskets and topped by a minaret.

"If our young Muslims know they can earn 500 pounds in the private sector, then why are they going to work as imams?"

Muslim leaders say Rashid's problem is replicated across Britain.

There is a chronic lack of well-qualified, homegrown English-speaking imams in Britain and, even when they are available, many mosques -- funded solely by donations from local, often deprived communities -- cannot afford them.

They therefore recruit imams from abroad who accept low wages but speak poor English, preach a conservative strain of Islam and are out of touch with their worshippers.

This, according to some observers, has turned many disaffected young Muslims away from the mosques and towards the violent, radical Islamism which appears to have inspired the London bombers -- all young British Muslims.

"Many imams reinforce certain historical and romantic ideas about Islamic history," said Abdul Kadir Barkatulla, imam of the North Finchley mosque in London and an outspoken critic of radical Islamism.

"That gives some young Muslims dreams, but the imams don't propose concrete action which can allow them to realise those dreams. The radical groups then come in and say 'look, we can show you how to make that dream a reality'."

He says he has regularly been attacked outside his mosque by angry young Muslims, usually verbally but sometimes physically.

"They're there every Friday, leafleting outside the mosques, trying to influence imams before and after prayers," he said.

"If the imams say anything about inclusiveness, these people get angry."

The imam at Luton Central Mosque, like most Islamic clerics in Britain, does not preach in English. He leads Friday prayers in Urdu, the official language of Pakistan.

Some Muslims say that while that is fine for older worshippers, many of whom were born in Pakistan, it only serves to alienate second and third generation immigrants who would rather speak and pray in English. "Every Friday in Britain you can hear prayers read in Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, Bengali, Gujarati and many other languages," says Mohammed Shahid Raza, a senior British imam at the Muslim College in west London.

"I would guess that English is used only in around a quarter of Britain's 1,200 mosques."

He says another problem with the British imam system is its lack of training. The Muslim College is one of only a handful of institutions offering recognised courses for would-be clerics and it is only able to train between 20-25 men a year.

But to what extent are these failings in British mosques contributing to a radicalisation of young Muslims?

Rashid, like Barkatullah, says radical Muslim groups regularly canvas outside his mosque, trying to drum up support for their campaign against Western values and British foreign policy in Iraq, the Middle East, Kashmir and elsewhere.

"Kashmir is certainly a particular concern here because that's where a lot of our worshippers come from," Rashid said.

But he says foreign policies or the shortcomings of some of Britain's imams should not be used to justify the killing of innocent people in London.

"We condemn the attacks absolutely and unambiguously," he said. "There is no justification for such acts in Islam."

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