

## Tensions soar at NY mosque site

**Simon Mann, Sydney Morning Herald, 21 August 2010**

**WASHINGTON:** A clash of civilisations writ small in New York is set to escalate with protesters gravitating to the site of a proposed \$US100 million (\$112 million) mosque and community centre two blocks from Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan.

A small, placard-waving group that has been speaking out for religious freedom is set to be swamped tomorrow when opponents of the project - families of September 11 victims, local residents, veterans and construction workers - rally outside the site, a yet-to-be-renovated former clothing factory.

Plans for the protests came as former New York mayor, Rudy Giuliani, became the latest high-profile figure to enter the debate about whether the mosque should be established so close to where Islamist terrorists flew two hijacked passenger jets into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001, killing more than 2700 people.

Mr Giuliani, who won plaudits worldwide for his nurturing of a city shell-shocked by the attacks, said he was hoping for a compromise in the divisive debate. "If you are a healer, you do not go forward with this project," Mr Giuliani said, referring to Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, a co-founder of Cordoba House, which is behind the project. "If you are a warrior, you do."

Mr Giuliani conceded that organisers had "every right" to build the centre. But he added: "The question is, should they build it? Are they displaying the sensitivity they claim by building it?" He said: "All this is doing is creating more division, more anger, more hatred."

The project has caused a political uproar, pitting high-profile Republicans, such as Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin against President Barack Obama, and dividing September 11 families and New Yorkers. Opinion polls have revealed that as much as 70 per cent of the American population object to building a mosque on the site.

Revelations of new hostility towards Muslims have also come to light, with at least 10 planned mosques across the US facing opposition from local communities, some of which have questioned the source of funds used for the developments.

Mr Giuliani's comments put him at odds with his successor, Michael Bloomberg, whose strong support for the mosque was backed up by Mr Obama at a White House dinner honouring the breaking of the daily fast in Ramadan. "As a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practise their religion as everyone else in this country," Mr Obama said. "That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community centre on private property in Lower Manhattan in accordance with local laws and ordinances."

But a day later he appeared to soften his stance, saying he had been speaking about broad principles only. "I was not commenting, and I will not comment, on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there," he said.

Mr Bloomberg, however, reiterated his support yesterday. "I haven't changed my views. This is about the First Amendment," he said. "It's about people being able to pray to whomever they want, whenever they want, wherever they want. "That's one of the fundamental tenets of our society. It's one of the things that differentiates us from other countries."