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**Ashcroft relaxes restrictions
on monitoring religious groups**

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Attorney General John Ashcroft has announced that he will relax decades-old restrictions that limit the FBI from monitoring religious and political groups that aren't specifically suspected of planning or committing a crime.

The Justice Department says the change is needed in the United States' war on terrorism. Some civil-liberties and religious groups, however, say it amounts to "religious profiling" of Muslims, a term borrowed from Ashcroft's own political battles last year.

During Ashcroft's confirmation hearings, some members of the Senate Judiciary Committee questioned his nomination because of strong ties to the Religious Right. Ashcroft supporters protested loudly, comparing such blanket suspicion of conservative evangelicals to racial "profiling" in law enforcement.

Now the argument has come full circle, with critics charging Ashcroft of enabling the same practice against law-abiding American Muslims.

The debate began Dec. 2, during an appearance by Ashcroft on ABC's "This Week" news program. Ashcroft said he was considering relaxing Justice Department restrictions that prevented FBI agents from monitoring religious and political groups without first having suspicion that they were committing or planning a crime.

"We will respect the rights of political freedom and religious freedom," Ashcroft said in the interview. But he also said potential terrorists cannot "gather over themselves some robe of clericism ... and claim immunity from being observed."

"People who hijack a religion and make out if it an implement of war will not be free from our interest," the attorney general said.

Ashcroft's Justice Department said little more about whether the rules would in fact be rescinded until May 30, when Ashcroft announced he would relax the policies.

The restrictions were put in place after revelations that the FBI had monitored Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil-rights leaders during the 1960s under the guise of "national security."

A Senate select committee investigating the practice termed it "a sophisticated vigilante program aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of First Amendment rights," and recommended the FBI policies that Ashcroft has now eased.

Muslim and Arab leaders blasted Ashcroft's relaxation of the FBI rules.

"Mosques, along with other religious institutions, are open to all Americans and have nothing to hide, but that openness should not be abused by using tactics of deception to spy on a religious minority engaged in lawful activities," said Jason Erb, governmental affairs director for the Council on American-Islamic relations.

"We cannot win the war on terrorism by turning the clock back to the days when the FBI infiltrated groups and harassed individuals engaged in constitutionally protected political dissent," he continued.

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee also criticized the new policy.

"American history demonstrates that minority communities, political dissidents, and critics of government policy can be vulnerable to politicized and unrestrained law-enforcement," says a statement published on the group's Web site. "ADC holds that law-enforcement agencies should investigate and try to prevent crimes, but should not investigate Americans based on their lawful and legitimate political and religious activities."

Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), a member of the House Judiciary Committee, decried Ashcroft's action as "a war on freedom, not a war on terror."

Other groups critical of Ashcroft include the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Ashcroft defended the rule changes, saying the old restrictions impeded the FBI's ability to investigate potential terrorists. As an example, he pointed out that any U.S. citizen can "surf" the Internet to check out religious sites. But under the old restrictions, he said, FBI agents couldn't, unless they had cause to believe the organizations were involved in crime.

The old rules also limited FBI agents from attending public meetings of religious or political groups, unless they were investigating a lead about a particular crime.

A Baptist religious-liberty leader contacted for comment by Associated Baptist Press greeted the change with muted criticism.

"Of course, we must protect our citizens," said Brent Walker of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. "But we need to be especially careful in times of crisis and grief not to sacrifice time-honored constitutional protections for religious liberty."

Officials from the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission declined to comment on the change in FBI rules, saying that ERLC Executive Director Richard Land was out of the country.

During Ashcroft's contentious Senate confirmation hearings last year, Land accused Ashcroft's critics of a "vicious episode of religious profiling" in their opposition to the nomination.

In an attempt to soothe fears about the new rules undermining religious freedom, FBI director Robert Mueller said June 6 that the FBI has no plan "to go into mosques." When asked about previous FBI harassment of religious groups, Mueller responded in the Washington Post, "I want to make absolutely certain that we don't repeat those abuses of the past."

But Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., took little comfort in that assurance. "The line between the FBI spying on church activities and messing in church matters is too thin to accept the word of honorable officials that no harm will result," he said.

Partnership vital for missions, Spanish Baptist pastor says

By Ken Camp

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A Baptist leader from Spain says some national Baptist leaders abroad are concerned about a new Southern Baptist missions philosophy that emphasizes church planting over joint planning.

Roberto Velert, a Spanish missions leader in the United States on a teaching assignment, said some overseas leaders perceive the International Mission Board's "New Directions" strategy as de-emphasizing a partnership that formerly existed between indigenous pastors and missionaries on the field.

Baptist pastors in Spain have had good working relations and personal friendships with Southern Baptist missionaries for many years, and they continue those relationships with some missionaries, said Velert, director of the international missions arm of the Baptist Evangelical Union of Spain.

But a few years ago, he said, "Some policy changed." He said some newer missionaries no longer develop relationships with national church leaders. Instead, they focus exclusively on their own ministries, particularly church planting, without consulting indigenous Baptists.

"That is a mistake," he said. "We need to work together. If not, it leaves the missionary in a difficult position."

The IMB began its "New Directions" policy in 1997 as part of a massive restructuring of the board's overseas operations. The strategy focuses on people groups rather than nations, and it casts missionaries in the role of catalysts for church-planting movements.

Velert, who just completed two semesters as a guest professor of missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, said missionaries already face barriers of language and culture when they come to the mission field. If they are viewed as isolating themselves from indigenous church leaders, he said, nationals will be even less receptive to their message.

"If missionaries don't have strong relationships with indigenous churches, they face rejection as a natural reaction," he said.

Eddie Cox, IMB regional leader for Western Europe, disagreed with Velert's assessment of the relationship between missionaries and national church leaders.

"Southern Baptist missions personnel enjoy a warm relationship with Baptist pastors of Spain. The IMB works closely with convention leaders, too," Cox said, noting his personal friendship with the general secretary of Baptists in Spain.

"We still have a partnership with the convention of Spain," Cox said. "However, it is a maturing partnership, because we're no longer pastoring, like we used to do in the past. When developing churches could not afford a pastor, they used to ask us to send a missionary, but no longer."

Some Spanish Baptists say they perceive that new missionaries are unwilling to work with national church leaders because indigenous church growth is "too slow" to suit them.

"In Europe, church growth is often very slow," Cox acknowledged. "It is a very difficult place."

Cox said that the vast majority of the people in Spain are "cultural Christians" at best, having no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Evangelical Christians number only about 100,000 of the 40 million people in Spain, and evangelicals "engage" only about half of the ethnic groups in Spain.

Cox said the IMB sees evangelizing the various people groups in Spain -- the Aragonese, Asturians, Caladonians, Extremadurans, Valencians and others -- as "keys to opening all of Spain to Christ."

"We continue to pray to the Lord of the harvest to provide more workers for the still unengaged peoples of Spain," Cox said.

Velert said European culture is very secular in many ways, in spite of the strength of the Roman

Catholic Church. Europeans tend to be "suspicious of church," and especially resistant to Americans who seek to impose their religious views on others, he said.

Velert said that underscores the need for missionaries to work with church leaders within the national structure, and he remains optimistic that Southern Baptist missionaries will recognize that.

"I hope it will change both for the good of the missionaries and the mission field," he said.

Velert said volunteers working through the Baptist General Convention of Texas provide a good example for cooperation with national churches, he said.

He said Texas Baptists have worked closely with Baptists in Spain, exploring ways that each could benefit from the strengths of the other. For example, he cited the concert tour by the Singing Men of Texas as an effective outreach tool because it was coordinated with Baptist churches in Spain.

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