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**News Briefs from ABP's Washington Bureau
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Congressmen, Muslims condemn FBI policies

WASHINGTON – Several Democratic members of Congress have joined Islamic and civil-rights groups in condemning recent FBI attempts to catalog and investigate Islamic houses of worship in the United States. Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) has joined fellow Reps. John Conyers (D-Mich.) and Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.), who recently condemned new FBI guidelines that instruct agents to count the numbers of mosques in their communities as a part of some terrorism investigations.

In a letter to Attorney General John Ashcroft, Frank endorsed his colleagues' opposition to the policy, saying it endangers First Amendment freedoms. "The very fact that the FBI is counting mosques without any regard to whether or not there has been any indication of illegal activity there unfairly characterizes them, and could well lead to intrusions on legitimate religious freedom," Frank wrote.

Ashcroft recently relaxed long-standing Justice Department guidelines that prevented FBI agents from monitoring domestic religious or political groups without just cause. FBI officials reportedly have said the practice is necessary because of the risk of so-called U.S.-based terrorist "sleeper cells" operating out of local mosques.

Meanwhile, Islamic groups are objecting to a recent FBI request for a Maryland mosque's membership rolls. The Associated Press reported Feb. 20 that local FBI agents, in a meeting with leaders of the Islamic Society of Frederick, requested the mosque's list. Mosque leaders informed local media of the request. (ABP)

Senate passes re-worked 'virtual child pornography' ban

WASHINGTON – The Senate has passed a bill designed to tighten restrictions on so-called "virtual child pornography." On Feb. 25, the chamber passed, without dissent, the bill designed to overcome the Supreme Court's objections to a similar bill they called unconstitutionally vague in its banning of synthesized images that appear to depict children engaged in sex acts.

The new bill prohibits the marketing or consumption of anything representing itself to be actual child pornography, even if it does not depict actual minors. The bill attempts to answer the Court's objections by placing the burden on the government to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused pornographer intended for consumers to believe the material was actual child pornography.

The bill also places the burden of proof on accused pornographers to show that the images they purvey are not actual children, but imitations. "If the Supreme Court cannot see that any sexual depiction of children is obscene on its face, whether it involves real kids or not, then we are in real trouble," said Ken Connor, president of the Washington-based Family Research Council.

The bill now moves to the House, where it is expected to pass and be signed into law by President Bush. (ABP)

Supreme Court declines challenge to kosher ruling

WASHINGTON – The Supreme Court has declined to hear an appeal of a lower court ruling that declared a New York kosher-foods law a violation of the First Amendment. The court refused, without comment, to hear an appeal from the state and several Orthodox Jewish groups to a ruling last year by the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The ruling overturned an 87-year-old state law that designed to prevent fraud in the sale of kosher – or ritually clean – foods. The law defined kosher foods as those "prepared in accordance with orthodox Hebrew religious requirements." A New York state agency headed by a rabbi was charged with inspecting kosher-food providers to ensure their food was prepared in accordance with the religious requirements.

The owners of a Long Island meat-packing company that had repeatedly been declared in violation of the kosher laws sued the state, saying the law impermissibly involved the government in judging matters of religious doctrine and illegally valued the Orthodox Jewish interpretation of dietary laws over other Jewish traditions.

The 2nd Circuit agreed, saying: "It appears to us that the challenged laws excessively entangle government and religion because they (1) take sides in a religious matter, effectively discriminating in favor of the Orthodox Hebrew view of dietary requirements; (2) require the State to take an official position on religious doctrine; and (3) create an impermissible fusion of governmental and religious functions by delegating civic authority to individuals apparently chosen according to religious criteria."

The state had argued the law was merely designed to prevent fraud and did not violate the Constitution because the state's interpretation of the kosher laws was sufficiently broad to satisfy all Jewish traditions. (ABP)

Calif. church, city, retailer settle dispute

CYPRESS, Calif. — A Los Angeles suburb and a local megachurch have agreed to end a legal dispute that pitted First Amendment concerns against the town's economic-development interests. On Feb. 24, the Cypress city council voted 4-0 to accept a settlement with the Cottonwood Christian Center and the Costco discount store chain.

The 4,500-member congregation, currently located in an adjacent suburb, purchased 18 acres of land in Cypress in 1999 to build a larger facility. However, city leaders delayed granting the church permission to build on the site while they worked out a deal with Costco officials to build on the site.

Last year, the city council voted to begin condemnation proceedings on the land, located in a valuable economic redevelopment zone, in order to seize it and sell it to Costco. City officials said the tax revenue provided by the store would suit the city's needs more than the tax-free land owned by a church.

In August, a federal judge issued an injunction preventing the city from seizing the land, saying a challenge by Cottonwood on constitutional grounds would likely lead to an overturning of the city's action.

Under the agreement, the city would purchase the 18-acre plot from the church for \$18.8 million, or about \$5 million more than the congregation originally paid. Then the city would sell the church 29 nearby acres for \$17 million. (ABP)



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