

Hello and welcome back. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Let's work together to improve your American English, and learn about important things at the same time. Today we hear from some Muslims in New York City, who say they are happy that an official spying program has ended.

Then we are off to Thailand, where two reporters have written something that has gotten them into deep trouble with the government.

As It Is ...from VOA ...is on the air.

The New York City Police Department has canceled the work of a group that spied on Muslims in their religious centers and community gathering places.

The group's purpose was to gather intelligence on possible terrorist plans and plots. It was established in 2003. Michael Bloomberg then served as mayor of New York City.

The city's Muslims have long said that the police group violated their constitutional rights. They said the police were profiling them – judging whole groups of people based on unfair descriptions of their religion, ethnicity and race.

Maimuna Abdul-Hakim is a member of Harlem's Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood and the mother three children. Like most New York citizens, she believed that the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the U.S. demanded increased protection against terrorism.

But she was surprised to learn that the Demographics Unit of the New York Police Department were using her mosque to secretly gather information.

She says she feels better now that the Unit's work has ended.

"Especially since I've been here my whole life and I have children who come here. And, you know, not knowing who these people are, we are kind of like a close community. It puts my guard up ...So, I'm happy. It's about about time."

Abdul Sabir is a religious Muslim who cleans the mosque. He also welcomes the closing of the Demographics Unit.

“I was very relieved. They are starting to see that we are very peaceful people. There is no need really to spy on us. Islam stands for peace...”

Imam Al Hajj Talib Abdur al Rashid is president of the Islamic Leadership Council of Metropolitan New York. He says the city’s Muslim religious leadership deeply distrusts New York City’s former police commissioner, Raymond Kelly.

He says many leaders have tried continually over the years to have good relations with the police department, called the NYPD. But he said many have expressed anger that the police spied on them all the time they worked closely with Mr. Kelly.

The imam said there was a feeling that the police had used the leaders and the mosque to get information. And he said the spying did not find any terrorist plots.

“And, as you know, the NYPD surveillance program did not turn up one single lead in all of that looking and all that spying on people.”

But the imam says he now feels hopeful that the current New York mayor, Bill de Blasio, has ended intelligence gathering by the Demographics Unit. He took note of the mayor’s promise to work to end religious, ethnic and racial profiling and the fact that he has been in office a short time.

Still, the imam says he is unsure how Mayor de Blasio’s action will develop into public policy.

“There is a real challenge to come up with a 21st century policy or policing for New York – one that ensures public safety without violating people’s civil and human rights.”

The imam said public officials get paid to meet such goals.

Muslim community activists note promises of the mayor's office and the police to build trust. But the activists also say that true healing can come only when they feel satisfied that no city agency or officials will do official profiling.

And for their part, officials continue to repeat their promises to do everything necessary and legal to protect all New York citizens from terrorism.

## **Media Freedom Questioned in Thailand**

Two reporters in Thailand are facing criminal charges for publishing a story about Thai security forces. The story said Thai forces were involved in moving, or trafficking, Rohingya Muslims from Burma. The story was first produced by Reuters news agency. It won a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting last week for its coverage of the Rohingya issue. Media observers consider the case a test for media freedom in Thailand. Mario Ritter tells us more.

Thai reporter Chutima Sidasathian and Australian editor Alan Morison face charges brought by the Royal Thai Navy. The charges include criminal defamation, or harmful misrepresentation, and breaking Thailand's Computer Crimes Act.

The two have reported for a long time on the situation of the Rohingya minority in Burma. Their work appeared on the online news service Phuketwan. Alan Morison is a former newspaper editor in Melbourne, Australia. He established the website more than five years ago.

Mr. Morison says the charges are questionable and appear aimed at the reporter Chutima Sidasathian. She assisted other reporters including those from Reuters on the story.

Last July, Chutima and Morison published a news story that included some material from Reuters. It said some naval security forces worked with traffickers for profit as many Rohingya were fleeing Burma.

Outbreaks of ethnic conflict in recent years have led to thousands of Rohingya fleeing Burma, often by boat. The group is an ethnic minority denied citizenship in Burma.

Last week, Reuters won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of stories about the struggle of many Rohingya to leave Burma and find refuge in other countries. The report accused Thai naval forces and police of cooperating with human traffickers to send the Rohingya to jungle camps until their families can pay to free them.

Alan Morison criticized the case against Chutima Sidasathian. He also praised Reuters for its award. But, he said the news agency had failed to support the Phuketwan service in the case.

London-based Reuters has not commented on the charges against the two reporters. The Royal Thai Navy has not acted against Reuters.

Alan Morison blames a mistranslation of the English language report published in Phutketwan. He says the Thai Navy's legal action is an attempt to close down the website because of its coverage of the Rohingya over several years.

"It is all about one paragraph from Reuters that has been mistranslated by the Royal Thai Navy, it's a paragraph in which the Royal Thai Navy wasn't mentioned in the original English version. And yet in the Thai version that was presented to police, the Royal Thai Navy is mentioned three times."

Both reporters have received the support of many groups including the International Commission of Jurists, U.N. rights groups and Thailand's Human Rights commission.

Human Rights Watch deputy Asia director Phil Robertson says the Royal Thai navy appears to be seeking to pressure Phutketwan.



Both reporters could face five years in prison for computer crimes charges and two years for the defamation charges. The media freedom group Reporters Without Borders rates media freedom in countries around the world. Its World Press Freedom Index places Thailand at a rank of 130 out of 180 countries. I'm Mario Ritter.

And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Thank you for spending some time with us. More Learning English programs are just seconds away, and world news follows at the beginning of the hour.



