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Tolu Olarewanju: "Moslem youths in Ibadan protest U.S. war on Afghanistan"

BARELY 48 hours to the "Great gospel crusade" promised by the German evangelist, Herr Reihard Bonnke, scores of Islamic fundamentalists yesterday took over major streets of Ibadan to protest what they perceived as victimisation and subsequent reprisal attacks on Afghanistan.

Chanting anti-American slogans, the demonstrators under the aegis of National Council of Moslem Youths Organisation (NACOMYO) described the anti-terrorism campaign led by U.S. against Taliban government in Afghanistan as a war against Moslems.

They condemned the U.S-led attacks and vowed to die for the course of Osama bin Laden, the world's most wanted man suspected to have masterminded the suicide attacks of September 11 on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre.

Led by their president, Alhaji Kunle Sanni, the youths called on U.S. government to halt the bombing of Afghanistan, saying that "radical Moslems worldwide might be forced to avenge the death of our brothers in any manner.

The protesting youths started their march from the Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ) Press centre at Iyaganku, Ibadan, where they burnt an American flag hoisted at the entrance to demonstrate their annoyance.

Carrying placards, they moved to the office of the British Council in the city where they presented a letter to the director for transmission to the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair and the American President, George W. Bush.

They marched through the major streets of Ibadan, before converging at the government's office, at Agodi, where security men prevented them from entry into the secretariat.

They paralysed human and vehicular movement for several hours, while all gates into the secretariat were shut to avert confusion, with security agents having a hectic time controlling the surging crowd which all the while chanted war songs.

Addressing reporters, NACOMYO boss said: "Could the death of Osama bin Laden and all the people of Al-Qaeda stop the anti-American sentiment which is a global phenomenon.

"No Moslem ... would fear those who can kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Death is meaningless to a Moslem fighting the course of Allah.

"Let them kill Osama bin Laden or Mullar Umar, but the fight for Islamic emancipation cannot be killed", he concluded.

Denouncing the demonstration, the Chief Imam of Ibadan, Sheik Busari Haruna, told journalists that the organisers had informed him of their plan, but that he advised against it.

He said those behind the protest might have been motivated by political and pecuniary reasons, but only wanted to hide behind Islam to foment trouble.

The Moslem cleric said: "Moslems and Christians are one. We do not believe in acrimony and religious intolerance in Yorubaland. Islam is a religion of peace and nobody should use it as a vehicle of violence.

When contacted, the Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) Ope Kujore, said he was not aware of the demonstrations, but added that the youths were entitled to air their views as long as it was done without a breach of the peace.

He denied fears that the protest was staged to foment trouble in the state.

The police have, however, assured that the week-long crusade by Bonnke, billed to commence tomorrow, would be hitch-free as arrangements have been concluded to ensure the safety of participants.

Kujore, who spoke against the backdrop of rumours of threat by unknown groups to disrupt the event, said the command has put in place machinery to prevent "unforeseen circumstances."

To avoid traffic jams in the metropolis, the command advised participants to leave their vehicles at home so as to ensure free flow of traffic. It, however, listed some designated places for parking for worshippers who may prefer to bring their vehicles.

The parking lots are, the University of Ibadan (UI), Glory Tabernacle, Trade Fair Complex, Scripture Union House, Emmanuel College of Theology, Methodist Grammar School and Jesus King Ministry, all in Samonda venue of the Crusade.

Meanwhile, Bonnke is expected to address a press conference on his arrival at Ibadan, before paying a visit to Governor Lam Adesina and the Olubadan of Ibadan.