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September 11, 2010

On Sept. 11 Anniversary, Rifts Amid Mourning

By ANNE BARNARD and MANNY FERNANDEZ

The ninth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, was marked on Saturday by the memorials and prayer services of the past, but also by events hard to envision just a year ago — heated demonstrations blocks from ground zero, political and religious tensions and an unmistakable sense that a once-unifying day was now replete with division.

The names of nearly 3,000 victims were read under crisp blue skies in Lower Manhattan after the bells of the city's houses of worship tolled at the exact moment — 8:46 a.m. — that the first plane struck the north tower of the World Trade Center. At the Pentagon, President Obama called for tolerance and said, "As Americans we are not — and never will be — at war with Islam."

The familiar rituals at ground zero — the reciting of names, the occasionally cracking voice of a reader, the silences — had a new element. The posters and photographs that victims' relatives held aloft bluntly injected politics into New York City's annual ceremony, addressing the debate over plans to build a Muslim community center and mosque near ground zero.

Two posters commemorated the victims James V. DeBlase and Joon Koo Kang. One read, "Where are OUR rights?" The other: "We love you!! Islam mosque right next to ground zero??? We should stop this!!"

Differences were evident at the outset. About 7:25 a.m., as a choir finished up "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Zuccotti Park, just southeast of ground zero, Alyson Low, 39, a children's librarian from Fayetteville, Ark., faced the media bleachers and held up a photo of her sister, Sara Low.

"Today is ONLY about my sister and the other innocents killed nine years ago," read the text beside the photograph.

Nick Chiarchiaro, 67, a fire-alarm designer, gave her a hug. Ms. Low's sister was a flight attendant on the plane that crashed into the north tower, where Mr. Chiarchiaro's wife and niece were working and were killed.

"I'm tired of talking about everything else, tired of the politics," she said. "Today is only about loss."

But for Mr. Chiarchiaro, it was not. “A mosque is built on the site of a winning battle,” he said. “They are symbols of conquest. Hence we have a symbol of conquest here? I don’t think so.”

Thousands filled the makeshift plaza beside a construction site sprouting cranes and American flags on a crystal-clear morning a few degrees cooler than the one nine years ago. They carried cups of coffee and wore T-shirts emblazoned with the symbols of the response agencies that had paid so dearly. Until midday, they placed flowers at ground zero.

During the ceremony, knots of protesters wandered the area, sometimes arguing. In the afternoon, a few blocks away, police officers and barricades separated demonstrations, both for and against the Muslim center, that each drew about 2,000 people.

Around the country, people debated the meaning of 9/11 and the appropriateness of political rallies and protests on its anniversary. The day drew an array of national and international figures. John R. Bolton, the former United States ambassador to the United Nations, addressed the New York rally against the proposed Muslim center via video, and Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician who tried to ban the Koran in his country, described Islam as an intolerant “power of darkness,” saying, “We must draw the line, so that New York, rooted in Dutch tolerance, will never become New Mecca.”

Thousands were expected to gather later in Anchorage, paying $74 to $225 to hear speeches by Glenn Beck, the conservative broadcaster, and Sarah Palin, the former governor of Alaska.

At the Pentagon, in a memorial honoring the nearly 200 victims of the attack there, Mr. Obama said that those responsible had sought to divide the country.

“They may seek to spark conflict between different faiths, but as Americans we are not — and never will be — at war with Islam,” Mr. Obama said. “It was not a religion that attacked us that September day; it was Al Qaeda, a sorry band of men which perverts religion. And just as we condemn intolerance and extremism abroad, so will we stay true to our traditions here at home as a diverse and tolerant nation.”

In Shanksville, Pa., where United Airlines Flight 93 crashed after passengers rebelled against the plane’s hijackers, the focus remained on the victims, with speeches by the first lady, Michelle Obama, and her predecessor, Laura Bush.

Mrs. Obama celebrated the bravery of the passengers. “They called the people they loved — many of them giving comfort instead of seeking it, explaining they were taking action, and that everything would be O.K.,” she said. “And then they rose as one, they acted as one, and together they changed history’s course.”

Terry Jones, the Florida pastor who had announced, and then suspended, plans to burn copies of

the Koran, arrived in New York on Friday seeking a meeting with Feisal Abdul Rauf, the imam behind the proposed Muslim center. The pastor's presence in the city, under police protection, only added to the day's drama.

On NBC's "Today" show, Mr. Jones said that neither he nor his congregants would burn the Koran, whether or not he met with the imam. "We feel that God is telling us to stop," he said.

Yet scattered imitators adopted his idea. Near the White House, 10 members of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue tore pages from the Koran that they said showed Islam's intolerance. Near ground zero, a man burned what appeared to be a page of the Koran. Behind him, someone held a sign: "Real Americans don't burn Korans."

In Afghanistan, five people were wounded when demonstrators protesting the proposed Koran-burning tried to storm a provincial governor's house.

At the New York demonstrations, there were no arrests, the police said, and the few clashes were verbal. Priscilla Lynch, 58, a Massachusetts social worker who supported the center and was wearing a T-shirt with Arabic writing, crossed a street near the opposing protesters. Some yelled: "Go back to Mecca!"

Supporters of the center rallied at City Hall Park, two blocks from the proposed center. The group was organized by left-wing and pro-Palestinian groups, following a separate vigil Friday by Christian, Jewish, Muslim, interfaith and neighborhood organizations.

Stephen Northmore, 24, an emergency medical worker who attended both, wore an American flag as a cape. Three friends from his native Staten Island served in Iraq and Afghanistan, he said. One lost a leg; another was the sole survivor when a Humvee hit a roadside bomb.

"I think it's offensive that my friends are ordered to go to Muslim countries and defend Muslims there against the same radicals that attacked us," he said, "but peaceful Muslims can't build a community center in New York City in their own country."

Sharif Chowdhury did not attend the rally after honoring his daughter and her husband, both Muslims who died in the World Trade Center, at the ceremony. But he said that objecting to the Islamic center implied that all Muslims were terrorists and violated religious freedom. "If you want to stop this," he said, "you have to change the Constitution."

Opponents of the Muslim center gathered on West Broadway for a protest organized by the Freedom Defense Initiative and Stop Islamization of America, both led by the conservative blogger Pamela Geller.

Jan Loght, 58, a pharmacist from Arizona, said she was "insulted" by the planned center and troubled by Islam. "If we allow them to build this, then that's saying we gave in, and Americans

don't give in."

Most of the crowd chanted "No Mosque" or "U.S.A." When Ilario Pantano, an Iraq war veteran running for Congress in North Carolina, mentioned Muslims, some shouted, "Kill them all!"

It was a Sept. 11 starkly different in tone and emotion from those past. For the first time, the anniversary of the worst attack on American soil and New York's deadliest disaster served almost as a backdrop to politics. The rancor of a ground zero riven by clashing views on Islam and the United States contrasted with the heartbreak of the place.

For many, the politics were cause for a new kind of mourning — for the setting aside of differences that many Americans felt on previous anniversaries.

"We need to get back to that commonality and spirit that we had after 9/11," said Julie Menin, the chairwoman of the local community board, who supports the Muslim center.

Many 9/11 rituals went on unchanged. In the East Village, former workers from Windows on the World — the restaurant atop the trade center that lost 73 workers — shared a brunch at Colors, a restaurant some surviving workers opened after the attacks.

People of many faiths, born in places from Egypt and Yugoslavia to Brooklyn, passed around babies and pictures. Zlatko Mundjer, 38, who had tended bar at Windows on the World, said no one was talking politics. "We are all family here — we are neutral."

Steve Harewood, 45, who had worked as a bartender, received a marriage proposal from Paula Sternitzky, 46. They set their wedding date on the spot: Sept. 11, 2011.

Reporting was contributed by Damien Cave, Helene Cooper, Adam B. Ellick, Angela Macropoulos, Colin Moynihan, Andy Newman, Sharon Otterman, Ashley Parker and Rebecca White.