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POSTED: Friday, Sep. 02, 2011

Racial healing needed on 10th anniversary of 9/11

By DEEPA IYER

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On Sept. 11, I was a 28-year-old attorney working for the Department of Justice. I remember being evacuated from my federal office building that morning, and later heading across the 14th Street Bridge to my home in Arlington, Va. I could hardly believe the sight of the Pentagon building with smoke billowing from it and a large hole in its side.

As I mourned the loss of life on that day and tried to comprehend what had happened, I also began to hear about acts of bias, backlash and violence directed at South Asians, Muslims, Sikhs and Arab-Americans around the country. Overwhelmed with stories from community members experiencing discrimination, I, along with several colleagues at the civil rights division of the Justice Department, began to collect and investigate these incidences.

In every context - the workplace, the schoolyard, the airport and the borders, and even in places of worship - community members reported increased levels of harassment, bullying and surveillance. Many recounted their hesitation to contact law enforcement or government agencies even in the wake of violent crimes for fear of being investigated or detained.

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The post-9/11 experiences of South Asians, Muslims, Sikhs and Arab-Americans have been likened to those of Japanese-Americans in internment camps in World War II, of African-Americans who have been racially profiled, and of Latinos who have felt the sting of anti-immigrant sentiment.

Yet, there still remains a perception that the post-9/11 civil rights abuses are part and parcel of living in today's world. Violating the rights of a Muslim passenger at an airport, bullying a Sikh child, monitoring activity at mosques or targeting immigrants from South Asian or Middle Eastern countries for questioning are often seen as the price that some need to pay to preserve the national security of the country as a whole.

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But these are exactly the types of situations that demand adherence to the principles on which our country was founded. As Martin Luther King Jr. wisely noted, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Sadly, 10 years since, our communities are still experiencing a level of xenophobia and racism that is reminiscent of the days and months after Sept. 11. The Park51 interfaith center controversy in Manhattan and the proposed Quran burnings of last summer, the restrictions on mosque constructions from New Jersey to Tennessee to California, the congressional hearings on Muslim-Americans held by Homeland Security Committee Chairman Peter King, R-N.Y., and the inflammatory language used by some elected officials or candidates for political office are fueling negative opinions about Muslims and those who are perceived to be Muslim.

The experiences of Muslim, South Asian and Arab-American communities over the past decade make up the latest chapter of racial injustice in the United States. All of us who are committed to civil and human rights must embrace a vision for racial healing and equity that includes the perspectives and leadership of these communities.

Americans have much to remember and reflect upon as we mark the 10- year anniversary of 9/11, but we also have an opportunity to forge a more inclusive and democratic future for our country.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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This article was prepared for The Progressive Media Project and is available to MCT subscribers. McClatchy-Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of McClatchy-Tribune or its editors.

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