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Small Muslim community builds Canada's biggest mosque

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By Jeffrey Jones

CALGARY, Alberta (Reuters) - A small Muslim community opens Canada's largest mosque this weekend, a state-of-the-art facility to serve as a both a place for prayer and base for adherents to reach out to this booming city.

Just 3,000 people make up the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the oil-industry hub of Calgary. But their leaders expect numbers to grow quickly, prompting the need for the 48,000 square foot (4,460 square meter) Baitun Nur mosque with its towering minaret and ornate calligraphy.

It also shows the increasingly multicultural makeup of a city often thought of as overwhelmingly white, conservative and Christian.

"We did not have intentions just to make the largest mosque. We started building it and we tried to meet our needs, needs for the future generations," organizer Safeer Khan said on a tour of the sprawling facility, whose architecture contrasts sharply with nondescript industrial and retail buildings in the city's northeast.

"We wanted to pull our young generation from the street to keep them busy here with constant activities and positive activities."

On Wednesday, the London-based leader of the sect, Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, arrived to adoring, chanting local Ahmadis. He toured the prayer halls, gymnasium, classrooms, offices, television studio and kitchen facilities.

His sermon was to be broadcast to Muslims in nearly 190 countries on Friday using the satellite TV facilities.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier are among dignitaries scheduled to help inaugurate the mosque on Saturday.

The well-wishing is a far cry from the reaction in countries like Indonesia, where the government last month warned that followers of Ahmadiyya, whose slogan is "Love for All, Hatred for None," could face jail time for tarnishing Islam.

Construction was completed in two years for just a C\$15 million (\$14.7 million) -- a fraction of what a similar-sized project would normally cost in the booming city of more than a million people -- due to volunteer labor, said Farhan Khokhar, head of communications for Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada.

The Ahmadiyya sect has about 50,000 members in Canada who also plan new mosques in Brampton, Ontario; Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; and Vancouver, British Columbia.

Khokhar said teachings include nonviolence, freedom of expression as well as a love for one's host country and sense of duty to the local community.

"We see Calgary as a leading city in Western Canada, which can actually influence society, so we want to be able to present to the Canadian society the true teachings of Islam, as practiced by the Ahmadiyya community," he said.

(Reporting by Jeffrey Jones; editing by Janet Guttman)

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