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Catholic News Service

CAIRO, Egypt (CNS) -- To help cut through Western fear of Islam and promote dialogue, a group of top Christian and Muslim scholars in Egypt have launched a news service that seeks to counteract misinformation about religious affairs in Arab countries.

The "Religious News Service from the Arab World [now Arab-West Report]," sent out weekly to subscribers by e-mail, contains translations of Arabic media stories on religion, reports on current religious issues, and news analysis and commentary from a team of mixed religious advisers.

Recent reports have dealt with a deadly outbreak of Christian-Muslim violence in Egypt, "personal status" laws determining application of Islamic law to Christians, and accusations by Western Coptic organizations that Egyptian Muslims were kidnapping, raping and forcefully converting Christian girls.

"There are no issues that are taboo or too sensitive for us to cover," said Cornelius Hulsman, director of the service. "Disagreements are OK, but they should be factual -- each side should be presented as it is," said Hulsman, a Dutch academic who has lived in Egypt for nearly two decades.

Islam is often portrayed inaccurately in the West, said Sheik Abdel Mo'ti Bayoumi, dean of the College of Islamic Theology at Cairo's al-Azhar University and one of the service's advisers. "This creates feelings of enmity -- both by Westerners against people in the East, and Easterners against people in the West," he said. "By helping people see the true reality of Islam, this news service defuses hatred," he said.

Another adviser, Jesuit Father Christiaan van Nispen, professor of Islamic studies at Cairo's Coptic Catholic seminary, highlighted the value of the service's translations of Arabic media. "It's no less important than the factual information, because it shows how people are feeling and evaluating things -- that explains many attitudes and acts which would be otherwise incomprehensible," he said.

Other advisers include a Coptic Orthodox bishop, a Muslim professor of law, the Coptic Orthodox director of an Egyptian human rights organization, an Anglican professor of literature, a Muslim opposition politician, an Anglican priest and a Muslim media consultant.

As part of the service, the subscribers -- mostly media outlets, universities and Western governments -- are able to directly pose questions to the board of advisers.

Hulsman said future plans for the service, launched in 1998, included launching a searchable, pay-per-article Web site, registering as a nongovernmental organization in Egypt and expanding focus beyond Egypt to other countries in the Middle East.

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