

North America's biggest mosque opens in Canada

North America's largest mosque was formally opened Saturday amid much fanfare in the city of Calgary in Alberta province.

Raised by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community of Canada at a cost of \$15 million, the Baitun Nur mosque is spread over 48,000 sq ft.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, opposition leader Stephane Dion, MPs, MLAs and judges joined 4,000 guests for the opening ceremony performed by Ahmadiyya sect global leader Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad.

Claiming more than 70 million followers in more than 160 countries, the Ahmadiyya sect was founded in Qadian (in Indian Punjab) in 1889 by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who proclaimed himself as the new messiah (rebirth of Christ) or Imame-e-Mahdi, awaited by Muslims.

Persecuted in many Muslim countries, the Ahmadiyya sect is considered un-Islamic in Pakistan.

Speaking after taking a tour of the gleaming complex, the prime minister praised the Baitun Nur mosque as a marvel in architecture.

He praised the Ahmadiyya community for suffering 'persecution and discrimination based on your religious beliefs', adding, 'you understand at a profound level that promoting religious freedom is an essential building block for peace and stability here and throughout the world'.

Obliquely referring to jihadist violence, the prime minister said: 'However, we define god, it is wrong to kill (people) in his name.' He lauded the sect leader for peaceful mission.

'It is a joyous day for us as we now have a new place of worship which happens to be the largest in North America,' community spokesman Safeer Khan told IANS.

'The local community alone pledged \$12 million and has raised \$8 million so far. The rest of the money came from our community elsewhere in Canada,' he said.

Spread over four acres, the complex has a built-up area of 48,000 sq ft which took two years to complete.

'We have a main hall of 7,200 sq ft to accommodate 1,000 worshippers. Another multi-purpose hall will cater to indoor sports, conferences, banquets, etc.,' Khan said.

Baitun Nur is the first mosque in North America to have an all-steel massive dome with an equally massive 400-kg chandelier underneath it.

Its ultra-modern design obviates the need for lights during daytime. 'Our designers have built so many glass lights that we will need not lights during the day,' Khan said.

He claimed it would be the first gender-neutral mosque in North America, with women sharing half the positions and enjoying equal status.

'It will also be an all-religion worship place where a Christian, Jew or Hindu can come and pray according to his religion,' he said.

There are about 50,000 Ahmadiyyas across Canada. Most of them are entrepreneurs and professionals.

Gurmukh Singh (© IANS / India eNews)