



Rt Hon Lord Justice Leveson
The Leveson Inquiry
Royal Courts of Justice,
Strand,
London
WC2A 2LL

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www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk

21st March 2012

Dear Lord Justice Leveson,

I am the Chairman of the London Muslim Centre and the East London Mosque. I am a former Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain.

I am aware that your Inquiry has received some evidence on the question of bias or prejudice against the Muslim community in press reporting. I would like to bring to your attention my own concerns in that respect.

That there is bias or prejudice I am of no doubt. It takes the form of gratuitous reference to words like "Muslim", "Islam" and "mosque" so as to encourage in the reader an association between the alleged activity of an individual or a group and all those who are Muslim, have Islam as their religion, or attend mosques.

It is also clear to me that its effect is very damaging to efforts to bring the Muslim and non-Muslim community together in this country.

Let me take a recent example. A short report was published in the print edition of the Daily Telegraph on 19 January 2011 headed: "Muslim extremist jailed for abusing girls at mosque". It contained the statement:

"Ashraf Miah ... repeatedly molested the girls while they recited religious texts at the East London Mosque, Snaresbrook Crown Court heard."

An extended article, written by Mr Andrew Gilligan, was published on his blog on the Daily Telegraph website. This was headed "Extremist leader jailed for child abuse". It contained the statement:

"Some of the victims were introduced to Miah at the mosque".

The short report and the extended article thus set out to link sexual abuse to the East London Mosque. Yet there was no basis for any such suggestion. The Metropolitan Police press release on the case made no reference to the mosque. The Metropolitan Police has told the London Muslim Centre that the prosecution case involved no suggestion that offending had taken place at the Mosque, or from introductions at the Mosque. The court report available to Mr Gilligan contained nothing to justify the statements above.

We raised the matter with The Daily Telegraph and Mr Gilligan, asking them from where they derived the link, between sexual abuse and the East London Mosque. The Daily Telegraph responded by taking the extended article down and later publishing a retraction in relation to the print report. For his part Mr Gilligan did not reply to our correspondence or even acknowledge a mistake was made.

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I have confined myself in this letter to one example of one occasion involving one journalist. Even then I should add that the journalist to whom I refer has authored a number of other articles in the last year or so which also contain incorrect statements, but perhaps more importantly were written in a way that appears to be motivated by a desire to undermine respect for the East London Mosque and for the many thousands of Muslims who attend the Mosque every week. Recently in the course of these articles he stated on 22 February 2012 on his blog on the Telegraph website:

“The IFE, the mosque and their allies have also made more than 200 complaints about [Mr Gilligan, the Telegraph and Channel 4’s Despatches]” to the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom. Every single one of those complaints has been rejected, too.

I can only speak for the Mosque. It has not hitherto made a complaint to Ofcom and has never had a complaint rejected.

As I stated above it is clear to me that the effect of this behaviour by journalists is very damaging to efforts to bring the Muslim and non-Muslim community together in this country. It encourages the wider community to think negatively about Muslims.

I have devoted much of my adult life to community cohesion, and I have spent many years among the community in London’s East End. I see the effect to which I refer, and people come and tell me about it.

The community is a very mixed one, and peace and mutual respect within that community depend on deepening understanding between different cultures, faiths and backgrounds. Every time a story is inspired that “Muslims” do this, that “Islam” encourages that, or that they go to “mosques”, the result is that a parent will keep a child away from others, a young person will take sides against others, an elderly person will choose not to enjoy community facilities alongside others, a false suspicion will be planted. The community ends up divided. The vital work of community leaders, schoolteachers, youth workers and others is undermined, and their morale is deflated.

I would add that I have read the written submission dated 31 October 2011 made by ENGAGE to your Inquiry. I respectfully support the points it makes to you in Section 3 of that submission.

Thank you for taking into consideration what I have written. I would be happy to make any further contribution to your Inquiry that you might consider helpful and appropriate.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature box]

Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari MBE
Chairman of the London Muslim Centre and the East London Mosque

Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed: [Signature box] Date: 19th April 2012