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NZ must not be tainted by 'maskophobia' - Islamic federation

New Zealand Herald (06.07.2011) / HRWF (12.07.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> - Auckland, New Zealand - The head of a major Islamic community organisation in New Zealand says it is disappointing two Muslim women wearing veils were involved in incidents with two Auckland bus drivers, but he believes they are isolated incidents.

The two drivers were given a final warning and counselling after the incidents in May. In one case a Saudi Arabian student was left crying on the street after a bus driver refused to let her board because of her veil and in the other a driver for the same company told another woman to remove her veil.

The Saudi Arabia Consulate-General has complained to the Government about the incidents.

NZ Bus told the Dominion-Post both drivers had been sent on counselling programmes - and had been found to be suffering from "maskophobia".

"Both drivers ... claim it's not religious ... but they genuinely have a phobia of people wearing masks, hence why we have not dismissed them," general manager Jon Calder told the newspaper.

One driver had completed counselling programmes, had visited a mosque and had apologised to one of the women. The other was undergoing the same programme. Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand president Anwar-ul Ghani today said the incidents were disappointing.

However, it was reassuring that the bus company involved had since taken steps to instruct its drivers on fundamental rights and acceptable behaviour, he said.

"The reputation of New Zealand as a country of tolerant and respectful people must not be allowed to be tainted by isolated cases such as these ones.

"While we are geographically distant we are very close in international news radar." Ethnic Affairs Minister Hekia Parata said New Zealand had very clear laws on religious freedom.

"We recognise there are different ways in which religions reflect themselves but it's not an unfettered freedom and where security is paramount then some compromises are required," she said.

"We've seen that happen, last year there was a closed circuit court case that allowed a woman to give her evidence without having to unveil herself."

Ms Parata said New Zealand was becoming an increasingly multi-cultural nation.

"We have to encounter these challenges and find compromises that work for our country."

She did not think the bus incident required compromise.

The husband of one of the women intends to lodge an official complaint with the Human Rights Commission.

Commission spokesman Gilbert Wong told NZPA today the commission had, of its own accord, offered to mediate between the parties.

Following the May incidents the Saudi Arabian consulate had contacted the commission asking for some sort of response. The commission had written to the Saudis involved and the bus company offering mediation, and was waiting for a response.

The incidents appeared to amount to discrimination on religious and national identity grounds, Mr Wong said.
