More than 4,500 miles from the chaos that unfolded in France’s capital in the past four days, French nationals in Tallahassee are mourning for their fellow countrymen and women.

Gunmen stormed a satirical newspaper, Charlie Hebdo, Wednesday, massacring eight journalists, two police officers a maintenance worker and a visitor before leading police on a massive manhunt through Paris that ended Friday with three men – described as Islamic terrorists – killed in two separate hostage situations. Four hostages were killed and two police officers injured when a gunman and woman held up a grocery store in a Paris suburb.

Al-Qaida took responsibility through the media for directing the attack on the newspaper, which routinely publishes edgy cartoons lampooning the Muslim prophet Muhammad and other facets of religion.

Nico Wienders was born in Normandy, about two hours from Paris, and is a longtime subscriber to the popular newspaper.

He was woken up in the middle of the night by friends in France who had shocking news of the attack.

"I was in tears when I first heard the news," said Wienders, a Florida State University oceanography researcher.

"My first reaction was, ‘Goodness, how can this be possible. How can there be so much hatred, violence and animosity,’ I was feeling sad as if I’d lost friends or family."

Wienders, who moved to Tallahassee 13 years ago when he was 31, said Charlie Hebdo, while controversial, was refreshing in that it said things no one else would.

“They’re pretty harsh and crude in their manor of depicting their opinions,” the 44-year-old said. "But it is smart, witty, harsh and accurate and that’s why they were powerful. These are not just some vulgar drawings."

When he visited Paris in October, it was different from the country he grew up in.

"People were discouraged," he said. "I saw France in a way that I’d never before."

He said besides an uneasy political and economic situation, there is tension tied to racism between native French and immigrants, particularly from Francophone countries.

It’s not a representation of the country as a whole, but he likened it to the tension between Americans and Muslims following 9/11.

"We’re going through the same stuff," said Wienders, who also serves as a liaison between French nationals in the Panhandle and the French Consulate in Miami. "But it’s worse and some of them build a lot of rancor against France and I understand that."

The Alliance Françoise de Tallahassee gathered for an open house Friday night.

The conversation among members, some of whom are French nationals, turned briefly to the week’s events, said Mary Bradford, who leads the organization.

She said members who are from France were relieved the siege had come to an end, but were still shocked and saddened as they communicated with family still in France.

She too said the attacks are reminiscent of 9/11.

"It’s the same kind of total violence and it’s traumatizing and very sad," Bradford said. "It’s the total opposite of peace or brotherhood."
People across the world have shown their support for the slain journalists and France as a whole, taking up the mantra "Je suis Charlie," or "I am Charlie" during large public demonstrations.

The support of freedom of speech and the country is heartfelt, Wienders said, but he hopes it's transformative to the real issues in France, too.

“I hope it will create reaction and it will bring about something, but I doubt it,” he said. “We are in a very unstable situation.”

Bradford said the worldwide demonstrations serve as an influential message.

“It's important for people everywhere to stand for the ideals that keep humanity moving forward rather than degrading,” she said.

French President Francois Hollande addressed the nation Friday night urging people to remain united but also alert. He called the attack on the Kosher grocery store “a terrifying anti-Semitic act,” and said the terrorists were “fanatics who have nothing to do with Islam.”

“The threats facing France are not finished,” he said. “We must be vigilant.” But, he added, “we will come out of this challenge stronger.”

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