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Church attack routs thousands of Indonesian Christians



Authorities in Indonesia's Aceh region have started to tear down churches following last week's religious violence that left at least one person dead and forced thousands of Christians to flee.

World Watch Monitor (20.10.2015) – Clashes broke out after Islamic hardliners burned down a church in Aceh Singkil on 13 Oct. According to local church leader Rev. Erde Berutu, "around 8,000" fled into the bordering province of Northern Sumatra.

Muslim residents had demanded that unlicensed churches in the area be pulled down, citing a lack of building permits, but religious and political figures – including Christians – agreed at a meeting on 12 Oct. to close the houses of worship. [Police started tearing down the churches with axes and sledgehammers on the morning of 19 Oct.](#)

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population, although Aceh is its only province to implement Islamic Sharia law. The national government had granted Aceh autonomy as part of a 2005 peace agreement that ended decades of separatist violence. The agreement was signed eight months after Aceh was devastated by the 2004 Tsunami.

Retaliatory attacks

In July, [clashes between Christians and Muslims](#) took place in Indonesia's eastern province of Papua, where a 15-year-old boy was killed when police opened fire on protesting Christians. News of the incident spread quickly across Indonesia, leading to a string of retaliatory attacks on Christians and churches in recent months.

On Friday 9 Oct, hundreds of Muslims including members of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front gathered at the local authority office to demand that all churches in Aceh Singkil be closed. The group also spread text messages to incite other Muslims to demolish churches that did not have a worship building permit.

The following Monday, the office facilitated a meeting among leaders of the local communication forum, Islamic schools, and Islamic organizations. They agreed to demolish 10 of the unregistered churches over the course of two weeks, starting on 19 Oct.

But the pact was broken the next day when a 700-strong mob marched to the government offices and later torched the Indonesian Christian Church, even though it was not on the closure list.

"Every church member is guarding their own church right now [from being destroyed]," a pastor told World Watch Monitor. Allegedly, some Christians started firing at the mob. A Muslim man was shot dead and in a clash that followed, eight others were injured by sharp weapons.

The mob retreated after the shooting, but they circulated a message that read: "We will not stop hunting Christians and burning churches. Christians are Allah's enemies!"

Fearing more violence, an estimated 8,000 Christians fled their homes to the neighboring province of North Sumatra, with many settling in Central Tapanulu. Local churches, schools, and government offices gave them shelter.

WWM was told that the temporarily displaced Christians had very little and "desperately needed clean water, food, clothes, baby food, blankets, and medicines," Reaching them meant driving along damaged roads through the jungle to avoid the threat of Muslim extremists. "Taking the main road [which means entering Aceh Singkil] is too perilous; Muslim extremists were guarding the border with an order to kill any Christians crossing the line," it was explained.

In a press conference, Gomar Gultom, General Secretary of the Indonesian Fellowship of Churches, criticized the local government of Aceh Singkil for allowing the violence to take place. "The meeting between the community and religious leaders was facilitated by the state, as if endorsing civil society to carry out violence," he said.

Gultom further regretted the law enforcers' inability to contain the violence, although an army official reasoned that they had been outnumbered by the Muslim mob.

Following the riot, 250 police personnel were deployed to secure the area, according to National Chief Police Badrodin Haiti in a recent visit to Aceh Singkil.

After declaring that tensions in Aceh Singkil had subsided, local authorities began to repatriate all the displaced Christians with the help of the army, which provided vehicles and escorts. But according to Rev. Burutu, whose Pakpak Dairi Christian Protestant Church was also burned down last month, Christians remain fearful. "There is no guarantee of safety from the state. For us, safety goes beyond the physical; it means that we can have our church back and exercise our freedom to worship."

The agreement to demolish unregistered churches was partly driven by a ministerial decree in 2006 instructing worship houses to obtain a religious building license, which are known to contain stringent requirements. "But even after all requirements are met, many churches are still prevented from getting the permit," a source told WWM.

The National Commission of Human Rights stated in 2013 that over 80 percent of worship houses in the country lack such license, including mosques. But unlike churches, unregistered mosques are hardly ever contested by civil groups.

Rev. Erde and Gultom have both refuted a pact that was allegedly made between Muslims and Christians in 1979 and 2001, allowing only one church and four smaller worship houses to operate in Aceh Singkil. They point out that Christians had settled in Aceh Singkil long before the nation's independence in 1945. Over time the number of churches in Aceh Singkil grew to 24, most of whose members originated from North Sumatra.

Indonesia ranks #47 on the 2015 World Watch List of 50 countries where persecution of Christians is most severe. Though a secular nation, Indonesia hosts the world's largest Muslim population and has seen a rapid increase in Islamic fundamentalism and violent attacks against not only churches but also Islamic sects deemed as deviant.

Comments of Human Rights Without Frontiers

At the last Universal Periodic Review (2012), numerous UN Member States urged Indonesia to take the necessary measures in order to protect members of its religious minorities and to guarantee their security as it can be seen from the following recommendations:

A - 108.102. Guarantee freedom of religion or belief and the full respect of the rights of persons belonging to minorities (France);

A - 108.103. Review laws and decrees currently in force restricting the freedoms of religion, opinion, and of expression, in order to prevent any risk of discrimination (Switzerland);

A - 108.104. Revise any national legislation that may be in conflict with international obligations, and strengthen efforts to ensure that any assaults against persons regardless of their religious affiliation are investigated, and that those responsible for such assaults are brought to justice (Sweden);

A - 108.105. Take legislative action and effectively prosecute the incitement of hatred and acts of violence against all religious minorities (Austria);

A - 108.106. Take further measures to ensure the full protection of the freedom of religion or belief for religious minorities (Japan);

A - 108.107. Intensify its efforts in taking all necessary measures to stop violence and discrimination against religious groups (Netherlands);

A - 108.108. Investigate and prosecute all cases of harassment and discrimination of religious minorities and non-believers (Norway);

A - 108.109. Continue to promote religious tolerance and to hold to account the perpetrators of violence and threats against religious minorities (Italy);

A - 108.110. Take a resolute action against any act of religious violence and implement appropriate, efficient measures to prevent intolerance or discrimination on religious grounds (Slovakia);

A - 108.111. Guarantee the full exercise of freedom of religion (Spain);

A - 108.112. Undertake measures to protect members of religious groups, including Ahmadis, Bahais, Christians and Shias from harassment and acts of violence. This should commence with holding senior law enforcement accountable for their duties that include training for law enforcement officials at the local level to ensure an effective and adequate response to these incidents. This would also include reviewing laws and regulations which discriminate, directly or indirectly against one's religion or belief, including in particular the Blasphemy Act (Canada);

A - 108.113. Intensify its efforts to respect and uphold freedom of expression, including political expression, and the freedom to manifest one's religious belief, for all its citizens, including by ensuring effective state protection for minorities (Australia);

Although these recommendations formulated during the interactive dialogue enjoyed the support of Indonesia, little progress has been made on this issue.

Considering that:

- Indonesia has signed and ratified the ICCPR which guarantees the right to freedom of religion
- Indonesia has endorsed the recommendations of its last UPR about the protection of the members of its religious minorities against violent groups
- after the 2004 tsunami, the EU pledged **€207 million** for Indonesia (See http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_5007_en.htm)
- the European Commission provided additional **€118 million** to help rebuild Indonesia's **Aceh** province (See <http://bit.ly/1M6MgYM>) *

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges:

Indonesia

- to protect its citizens belonging to the Christian minority in Aceh and their places of worship
- to guarantee them the full exercise of their freedom of religion
- to prosecute the perpetrators of the recent acts of violence in Aceh
- to report on the judicial follow up of acts of violence committed against religious minorities since the 2012 UPR

The EU and its Member States

- to use all the means at their disposal to ensure that Christians in Aceh are protected against acts of social hostility and violence by some Muslim groups
- to make sure Indonesia respects their right to freedom of worship and delivers the necessary permits to build churches, rent or buy premises to be used for their religious activities
- to consider suspending its Partnership and Cooperation Agreement as long as Indonesia has not effectively guaranteed their security, protected their lives and their places of worship, prosecuted the perpetrators of the acts of violence, and ensured that financial compensation be paid to the victims

(*) For further background, see:

[MEMO/05/310](#): Aceh: Commission's contribution to the peace process and post-Tsunami reconstruction.

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/tsunami>

http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/echo/presentation/index_en.htm

Indonesia: One dead and church burned in Aceh

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (15.10.2015) - A man was killed and a church burned down in violent clashes in Aceh Singkil, Indonesia, on 13 October.

Violent clashes broke out after a demonstration on 6 October by an Islamic youth group demanding that the local government tear down a number of churches that they claimed had been built illegally without permits. They threatened to tear down the churches themselves if their demands were not met.

The local government agreed to demolish at least 13 churches in Aceh Singkil and force the churches to register for new permits to build churches. They also decided to force the Christian community to adhere to a 1979 agreement which stated that only one church and four chapels can be built in Aceh Singkil. However the group took matters into their own hands. After the first church was burned down, they clashed with Christians at another church.

The police and the military were deployed to restore order and the attack on the churches was condemned by President Joko Widodo.

The organisation Solidarity of Victims of Freedom of Religion and Belief Violence (SobatKBB) stated that the incident in Aceh must not be viewed as an isolated incident but is the result of discriminative policies against churches which have been applied since 1979. Furthermore, the government's 2006 Joint Ministerial Regulation on Houses of Worship has complicated the question of legality for houses of worship built before 2006.

Palti Panjaitan, National Coordinator of SobatKBB, said that the government's focus must not only be on halting the violence but also on conflict resolution and the repeal of discriminative legislation: "Without any serious effort, violence in Aceh will keep recurring. Christians practically live without any protection, which keeps them in fear of further attack and violence."

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's (CSW's) 2014 report, [Indonesia: Pluralism in Peril](#), highlighted "the inaction and at times complicity of the local, provincial and national authorities" as a factor fuelling religious intolerance in Indonesia. Recommendations to the Indonesian government include the repeal of discriminatory legislation and ensuring that violations of religious freedom are properly investigated and the perpetrators are brought to justice.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, "This tragic attack is the latest in a series of incidents in recent years, in different parts of Indonesia, which threaten Indonesia's tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance. It is vital that the Indonesian government act to bring the perpetrators to justice and prevent further violence. "

Indonesian church holds 100th service outside Presidential palace

World Watch Monitor (24.09.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1YMdTjA> - At the heart of the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, in the megacity of Jakarta, Indonesia, a church this Sunday will hold its 100th open-air Sunday morning service next to a main road – because a city mayor is afraid to insist that a Supreme Court order is carried out.

Bogor City, 60 kilometres south of the Indonesian capital Jakarta, is said to be one of the world's most densely populated areas. In April 2010, Bogor's Taman Yasmin Indonesia Christian Church (GKI Yasmin) was sealed and padlocked by order of the mayor of Bogor and the city government. According to a national paper, he claimed that the previous sub-village head had falsified community signatures and that the church brought trouble with local Muslim neighbours. Later he said that the church should not be built on a street with an Islamic name.

In December 2010, the Indonesian Supreme Court affirmed the church's constitutional right to freedom of worship; however the mayor refused to reopen the church. The Indonesian Ombudsman's Office also urged the Bogor city administration to withdraw its later 2011 decree annulling the church's construction permit.

GKI Yasmin's congregation resorted to conducting services on the pavement in front of their former church for more than two years. During services outside the church, they constantly faced harassment from groups of protesters – including from Islamist extremist groups such as FORKAMI (Indonesian Muslim Communication Forum), GARIS (Reformed Islamic Movement) and the FPI (Islamic Defenders' Front).

Fearing further aggravation from hard-liners, members of the Protestant church then held clandestine services at the houses of congregation members. In 2012, they started to conduct Sunday services in front of the State Palace, to further their case with the government.

The Bogor City Government reportedly allocated land for the replacement church some seven kilometers from its previous location, and a budget of up to 4.5 billion rupiahs (\$305,000) for a new church. The West Java regional government said it could provide up to 10 billion. But it is by no means certain that, even should the church agree to relocation, which so far they utterly refuse to do, they would be allowed to build a new church. Among other things, they would have to obtain a new building permit, which would require them to obtain approval signatures from 60 local residents and 90 of the church congregation itself (all proved by local ID cards).

Indonesian President Jokowi, who completes one year in office in October, has introduced some improvements for the country's minority faiths, but a case like this one still shows how much room there is for progress. A recent report says he has the power to enforce the highest court's order on Bogor, but so far he has taken no action. The report continues, "As Human Rights Watch noted, Jokowi has also sought to "outsource a solution to Indonesia's religious intolerance problem to NU and Muhammadiyah, [Indonesia's two largest Muslim organizations]." While they both promote tolerant versions of Islam, the report says "some of the growth of extremism, which has many facets, can be dealt with only with the power of the state".

Indonesia's underground atheists lay low after Facebook post that led to imprisonment

Global Post (11.05.2015) - <http://www.globalpost.com/article/6542699/2015/05/08/indonesias-underground-atheists-stay-under-radar-after-case-led> - As the call to morning prayer rings out over Yogyakarta at sunrise, Arimbi prepares herself for a long day of classes and waitressing at a local cafe.

Wrapping herself in a bright blue hijab, the 26-year-old climbs onto her motorbike and heads to the Islamic university where she studies community development. But Arimbi has a secret she keeps from her classmates, professors and all but her family and closest confidants. She's an atheist.

While Indonesia is often celebrated as one of the world's few Muslim-majority democracies, non-religious people say the country's tough anti-blasphemy laws force them to live a façade of faith, masquerading as Muslims when many spend hours a day mocking religion in private online forums.

But millennial-aged atheists like Arimbi are growing bolder, trying to change national opinions on atheism by living as openly as possible while avoiding jail time. She said she wears the hijab on her college campus, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, and when visiting her strict Muslim father, but only out of respect for her classmates and family. Arimbi said walking away from Islam in her late teens was the most liberating choice she's ever made.

"I'm free," she said. "That's the first feeling I had when I became atheist. I never felt sad. My mind is open and I can finally be free."

However, the anti-blasphemy laws prevent Arimbi and other atheists from publicly expressing ideas that counter any of the state-approved religions.

This state ideology, also known as Pancasila, grants protections for six recognized religions — Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism — but also declares Indonesia a monotheistic nation. That means atheism is not an accepted form of spiritual expression.

For advocates like Arimbi, it's a constant struggle for recognition and freedom to be irreligious.

"The blasphemy law is hurting our rights as citizens. The government needs to be clear about Pancasila [and how it relates to minorities] and then make laws to protect us," said Arimbi.

And who better to spread this message of religious freedom than Arimbi? Raised in a conservative Muslim home, Arimbi quickly grew into a devout Muslim, learning to read the Quran as a young child.

Convinced that the whole world should experience Islam and Sharia law, Arimbi became radical, enlisting in the Muslim extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir at the age of 18.

Known for its staunch anti-Israel views and recent military interference during the civil war in Syria, Hizb ut-Tahrir is designated in many countries as a terrorist organization.

"We were taught to fight for a caliphate [Islamic state] and share our views with others," she said. "I heard the men received military training...They were quite radical actually, jihadists."

However, Arimbi began doubting her devotion to the group when her questions about the plausibility of a global Islamic state went unanswered.

"I always wanted to know how we can change the system without a coup d'état and they had no answer for me," Arimbi said. "I was confused and felt something was wrong. I thought, 'Is this really coming from God?'"

Moving to Yogyakarta for college in 2009 did nothing to ease her doubts.

"If the Quran is true, there should only be one tafsir (interpretation). If not, the possibility is so large for you to make a mistake," she said.

In Yogyakarta, Arimbi befriended liberal Muslims who echoed her sentiments about the infallibility of the Quran and the Hadith, which summarizes the teachings and acts of the Prophet Muhammad.

"It's terrible, there's no methodology to check whether it is really coming from Muhammad," she said.

Unable to find any answers in her community about the existence (or lack thereof) of God, Arimbi turned to another social network: Facebook.

She joined a private Facebook group for Indonesian atheists and started having underground conversations with other like-minded people.

"She was already quite critical when she joined the group," said Karl Karnadi, who started Indonesian Atheists (IA) in 2008 for fellow non-believers like himself.

Karnadi, who now works for Facebook in San Francisco as a software engineer, said Arimbi started asking questions right away and even began moderating discussions.

Six months later, Arimbi made the decision to come out as an atheist to her family.

"My father cut off my financial support so I have to pay for college myself," she said. "My younger brother and sister are liberal Muslims so they help me out...But it's very hard being atheist in Indonesia."

Statistics on religion in Indonesia help show why that is.

A 2010 poll by Pew Research Center revealed that nine in 10 Indonesians think the influence of Islam in politics is a positive thing. Likewise, 30 percent of Indonesians said they were in favor of sentencing to death those who abandon the Muslim faith.

Lukman H. Saifuddin, Indonesia's minister for religious affairs, maintains that atheism is not illegal. However, he also acknowledged that the laws are vague and open to interpretation. Asked whether self-identifying as an atheist online was considered blasphemy, Saifuddin quipped, "the courts will decide."

"As long as there are no complaints and no individuals are being forced to convert, it shouldn't be a problem," he said. "But spreading atheism [even online] is illegal."

Alexander Aan understands better than most how Indonesia's blasphemy laws work.

Aan's conviction made international headlines in 2012 after an Indonesian court found him guilty of "stirring up hatred" when he posted on his personal Facebook account that "God does not exist."

The former civil servant from West Sumatra spent nearly two years behind bars and is still putting his life back together since his release in 2014.

"People told me I was just looking for a sensation," said Aan, 34, who now teaches math to make a living. "But I have a duty to let people know we are one. In religion, people are so exclusive. On Facebook, I was very aggressive against the idea of exclusiveness. It made the religious people hate me."

In fact, a mob confronted Aan at his government job, demanding to see his Facebook account after a former friend reported him to authorities. Police arrested Aan after finding the brief post that declared his religious disaffiliation.

"They forced me to beg to Islam for forgiveness like a child," he said. "I just felt alone and thought all Indonesians hated me. I was very depressed."

Rafiq Mahmood is a member of Atheist Alliance International, which supported Aan throughout his conviction and imprisonment. Mahmood himself was Muslim for 40 years before "converting" to secular humanism. He remembers Aan's trial vividly.

"The court said Alex was not a criminal — but that he must go to prison," said Mahmood. "We're not safe here. And because of Pancasila, the law cannot allow atheism."

Mahmood expects millennials will change the country as globalization slowly affects how young adults in Indonesia view equality and democracy.

"They can't run away, some of us have to stay behind and support each other so we can try and make this world more enlightened," he said. "We have to fight for it."

Due to so much religious pressure, many atheists like Aan choose secrecy to survive.

"It's difficult to pretend with my family. I don't care about others, but with my family it's difficult," said Aan, who said he lives separately from family and leads them to believe he is still Muslim.

For Arimbi, the same holds true. While her family does know about her atheism, she does not argue the point in order to keep the peace.

"Believing in God is very holy here, but I would not leave my family. Boyfriends and friends will leave you, but my family still accepts me," she said. "Maybe I sound like a fool, but I love them."

Jakarta: Religious Affairs minister defends teacher accused of "proselytising"

Asia News (13.01.2015) <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Jakarta:-Religious-Affairs-minister-defends-teacher-accused-of-proselytising-33177.html> - Indonesia's Religious

Affairs Ministry has intervened in a dispute involving an Islamic religious professor in Banda Aceh, "guilty" in the eyes of some Muslim extremists of "proselytising" in favour of Christianity because she brought a group of her students to a church.

As a result of the trip, Rosnida Sari, a Muslim, has become the victim of a vicious smear campaign and has received death threats. Some fundamentalist groups have gone so far as to "advise" her to "leave" the country.

In reality, all that Prof Sari was trying to do was to promote interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding among believers, starting in school.

Speaking to *AsiaNews*, interreligious dialogue activist Joan Elga Sarapung, from the Interfidei Group, said that Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin did call the dean of Ar-Raniry Islamic University, and asked him to "intervene" on the professor's behalf.

According to Sarapung, Minister Saifuddin called Aceh police authorities, asking them to provide protection for the teacher.

The Religious Affairs minister also spoke with the professor, who teaches Islamic religion, and told her that she would not be fired over the issue. He asked her to "stay calm" because the matter "has been addressed in the most appropriate way."

The dispute was sparked by the professor's decision to bring her class to visit a church and meet a Protestant clergyman.

After pictures of the visit were posted on the website of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, someone launched a campaign to discredit the Muslim teacher by claiming that she wanted to "convert" the youth to Christianity.

The original event, which occurred last November, became controversial only a month later.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, has often been the scene of attacks or acts of intolerance against minorities, whether Christians, Ahmadi Muslims or people of other faiths.

Unlike the rest of the country, the province Aceh enforces Islamic law (Sharia), after the central government signed a peace agreement with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

In many other parts of the country (such as Bekasi and Bogor in West Java), a more radical and extreme vision of Islam is also growing.
