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INDONESIA: Clerical body 'sorry' for false apostasy claims

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North Sumatra branch of Ulema Council sparks row after official said conversions were rampant in local district

By Katharina R. Lestari

branch of Indonesia's highest Muslim clerical body was forced to apologize on May 17 after coming under fire from local authorities and Christians for indirectly accusing religious minorities of apostasy.

The row began several days earlier when the North Sumatra branch of the Ulema Council claimed that a district in the province had a very alarming rate of apostasy cases.

Muhammad Hatta, who heads the council's local religious propagation desk, said over the weekend that he was informed about a large number of Muslims abandoning their faith in Langkat district.

Despite a lack of concrete data confirming this, he claimed that "it was very alarming."

According to him, there were attempts to convert local Muslims to other faiths through marriage and other methods.

"Sometimes a couple professing Islam and another religion get married the Islamic way but after the Muslim is forced to adhere to his or her partner's religion," Indonesian language news portal detick.com quoted him as saying.

He pointed to a case in which a 30-year-old Muslim woman was allegedly forced to convert to Christianity after marrying a Protestant man in the district.

However, his claims were fiercely denied by a local official and a Catholic Church leader.

The acting district head, Syah Afandin, acknowledged a Muslim woman had converted to Christianity but asserted that "she was the only one" and "there are no attempts at organized apostasy."

He said Hatta's remarks were very inflammatory, "because what really happened was that the Muslim woman dated the Christian man, left her parent's home for six months to be with him,

converted to Christianity, and was married to him by a Protestant pastor.”

He also said the Muslim woman’s parents had filed a police report which was rejected as they had no authority to deal with the case.

Speaking with UCA News on May 17, Reverend Ahmad Sajli DK Pinem, general secretary of the North Sumatra chapter of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, criticized the said the local Ulema council claim was blown out of proportion.

Commenting on the conversion of the Muslim woman he said: “Conversion is a personal affair. It has nothing to do with others.”

He said the woman’s family might be disappointed with her decision. “Or perhaps they want something else. I do not know.”

He also called on Christians in the district not to be provoked by the Ulema Council’s claim about large-scale conversions he said.

The North Sumatra chapter of the MUI finally issued a clarification on May 17 following the criticisms.

Its chairman, Zulkifli Ahmad Dian, apologized for the confusion and said the district had in fact recorded no mass apostasy attempts.

Photo: An official at the North Sumatra branch of Indonesia’s Ulema Council claimed many Muslims were being converted to other religions through marriage. (Unsplash)

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