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Muslims in Indonesia violating rights of Christians

Christian Today (05.01.2013) - Concerns are growing over at least 50 cases of religious freedom violations against Christians in Indonesia last year, as not only extremists but ordinary Muslims were responsible for many of the acts of intolerance and violence, according to a recent study.

"Cases of intolerance against Christians remained high in the country" in 2012, Bonar Tigor Naipospos, deputy chairman of the Jakarta-based group Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, told Morning Star News.

According to a story by Morning Star News, Christians were targeted in at least 50 of 264 cases of religious freedom violations in 2012, more than any other group, Naipospos added.

Setara recorded 54 such cases against Christians in 2011, following the especially volatile year of 2010, when there were 75 cases against Christians.

Setara's Report on Freedom of Religion and Belief in 2012 notes that the 264 cases of religious freedom violations overall last year include 371 "acts" against religious minorities, as one case often involves more than one attack or action.

Morning Star News said the Setara report came days before more than 200 local Muslims threw rotten eggs at Christians going to a worship service in Bekasi on Christmas Eve.

A photographer from Agence France-Presse witnessed furious men and headscarf-clad women blocking the road and launching the eggs at members of the Filadelfia Batak Christian Protestant Church (locally known as the HKBP) on the outskirts of Jakarta.

Morning Star News reported that the attack was the latest in a series of clashes between members of the HKBP and Muslim residents who oppose the church's existence. The Bekasi administration closed the church's building in 2009, and it remains sealed in defiance of a Supreme Court order in favor of the church.

"During the attack, Tambun Police Chief Comdr. Andri Ananta and North Tambun District head Suhartono did nothing," the Rev. Palti Panjaitan, pastor of the church, complained at a press conference in Jakarta on Dec. 26.

At the same time, Morning Star News reported, members of the Yasmin Indonesian Christian Church (locally known as the GKI) in the Jakarta suburb of Bogor - another church sealed by authorities (in April 2010) - celebrated Christmas in the open air. The church, which has faced many violent attacks, remains locked despite a ruling of the apex court ordering local authorities to allow members to use the building.

The two churches held a joint-morning service on Christmas Day in front of the Presidential Palace in Jakarta as part of a protest.

Morning Star News said a sign of growing intolerance could be seen days before Christmas when the Indonesia Ulema Council (the MUI, a confederation that represents all Muslim groups to the government) issued a fatwa forbidding all Muslims from extending Christmas greetings to Christians. It also asked President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to skip Christmas celebrations.

Suffering at least 50 cases, Christians were the main target of religious freedom violations and violence in the Sunni Muslim-majority country. The Shia minority witnessed 34 incidents against their members, and Ahmadiyyas - a Muslim minority sect seen as heretical by Sunni Muslims - were the targets in 31 cases.

Ordinary Muslims

Morning Star News said that while Indonesia's Muslim majority population of 232.5 million is believed to be largely tolerant, a trend is emerging of ordinary local Muslims leading violent attacks, not just outside extremist groups, the report found.

Many violent attacks were carried out with impunity by local Sunni Muslims, indicating that "the virus of intolerance" has trickled down from extremists to ordinary residents, Naipospos said.

On top of the list of non-state actors were "citizens," responsible for 76 cases of religious freedom violations - as opposed to the extremist group Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which was behind 24 cases, and the MUI, which was responsible for 25 cases, according to the report.

Morning Star News said state officials were involved in 154 of the 264 cases of religious freedom violations. The report says police officials were involved in 40 cases, followed by district administration officials at 28 cases.

Morning Star News reported that the 264 cases occurred in 28 of the country's 33 provinces, the most volatile region being Java Island, where more than 2.5 million Christians live. Most of the Christians in Java are migrants from other areas who have come in search of jobs over the years.

West Java Province, where Bogor and Bekasi are located, witnessed the highest number of religious rights violations this year, with 76 cases. Next came East Java with 42 cases. West Java is home to about 520,000 Christians, East Java 1.28 million.

Morning Star News said Aceh Province, with the highest proportion of Muslims in Indonesia and partially governed by sharia law, recorded 36 cases in 2012. In Banda Aceh, the provincial capital, authorities closed down nine churches earlier in the year under the pretext that they were not legal. The churches, which remain officially closed, had been functioning for years.

Central Java Province, where about 650,000 Christians live, witnessed 30 cases in 2012. South Sulawesi, which has 803,000 Christians, recorded 17 cases.

Morning Star News said the report does not give an optimistic outlook for the year ahead. Regional elections are due in 2013, and preparations are underway for national elections in 2014. The politically active months ahead could result in a higher incidence of intolerance and violence, as parties are expected to use religion to woo Muslim voters and support of influential extremist groups, Naipospos warned.

Morning Star News said religious intolerance overall in Indonesia has been rising for the past five years. The Setara Institute recorded 135 cases of intolerance in 2007, 265 cases in 2008, 200 in 2009, 216 in 2010, 244 in 2011, and 264 incidents last year.

Theophilus Bela, president of the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum, told Morning Star News that his group recorded 75 incidents of intolerance and violence against Christians - actual and planned - across the country last year. The planned incidents were those his group prevented with the help of local authorities, he noted.

"Still, the actual number of incidents could be higher, as not all cases come to one group's notice," Bela said.

Indonesia arrests fake Islamic prophet for 'sex cult'

AFP (14.12.2012) - A man who allegedly claimed to be an Islamic prophet and tricked his male followers into allowing him to have sex with their wives and daughters has been arrested, Indonesian police said Friday.

The 48-year-old was detained on the island of Borneo after several followers reported he had told them to pay him money or organise sexual relations with relatives to purify them of their sins, a police spokesman said.

"According to the followers' reports, if they can't afford to pay the money, they have to let their wives or daughters sleep with him as an alternate way to go to heaven," Kutai Timur district police spokesman Ketut Cakri told AFP.

"We believe the man has slept with several of his followers' wives and daughters, and has received money as well," Cakri said, adding that he did not know if the women had consented to sex or if the man had any female followers.

He had spread "deviant" Islamic teachings through his cult for at least five years, Cakri said, and could be jailed for fraud and blasphemy in the world's biggest Muslim-majority country.

"We don't know the exact number of followers or victims yet, but the police investigation is still ongoing. We are digging for more information from him and his followers," Cakri said.

In 2009 an Indonesian court jailed for blasphemy a cult leader who gave sermons in his underpants and demanded that his acolytes take part in orgies.

A human rights report addresses the issue of religious freedom

Asian Human Rights Commission (10.12.2012) - On the occasion of the International Human Rights Day, 10 December 2012, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) publishes its annual report on the State of Human Rights in Indonesia in 2012. **The full report is now available for download at <http://www.humanrights.asia/resources/hrreport/2012/ahrc-spr-006-2012.pdf>**

Instead of being improved, the protection of religious minorities and their rights has been deteriorating during 2012. In addition to the continuing denial by the government to the Christian communities' right to freely manifest their belief and establishing their own place of worship, physical attacks and intimidation against the Ahmadiyah and the Shia Muslims dominated the human rights discourse during the year. Instead of taking adequate responses to punish those persecuting and discriminating the religious minority groups, the Indonesian government has been openly taking side on the majority groups if not being silence and failing to take any adequate response. Criminal investigation of violence directed against minorities hardly ever take place but individuals were sentenced to punishment for peacefully expressing their belief that happens to be different with the mainstream public. The leader of Shia community in Sampang, Tajul Muluk, was sentenced to a two year term of imprisonment for his dissenting belief regarding the five pillars of Islam and six pillars of Islamic faith. An atheist, Alexander Aan, was sentenced to two and a half years of imprisonment for 'disseminating information aimed at inflicting religious hatred' where in fact all he has done was posting offensive-yet not-inciting materials on a social network website.

Persecution and discrimination against religious minorities

Violence and discrimination against religious minority groups in Indonesia in 2012 has attracted the attention of the international community. As in the previous year, the Christian community and the Ahmadiyah have been subjected to discrimination, which took the form of the closing down of places of worships and intimidation. Yet, as pointed out by ELSAM, unlike 2011, the persecution of religious minorities this year has not been only concentrated in Java. It has also spread to other locations (9). For example, attacks and violence towards the Ahmadiyah in 2012 took place not only in Singaparna, Tasikmalaya and Cisalada, all of which are located in Java Island, but also in Batam (10). In April 2012, the fundamentalist group Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*,

FPI) intimidated, beat, and threatened the leader of Ahmadiyah Batam, making him signed a statement saying that his congregation will no longer hold their regular religious activities at Ruko Nagoya.

The case of HKBP Filadelfia

HKBP Filadelfia bought a piece of land located in Jejalen Jaya village in 2007. The understanding was that the site would be where their house of worship would be located. HKBP Filadelfia went through all the procedures required by law for the establishment of places of worship, including those enshrined under the 2006 Joint Regulation of the Ministry Religious Affair and the Ministry of Interior. On Christmas Day in 2011, however, the Muslim residents of Jejalen Jaya village held a massive protest, refusing the presence of a church in the area. This was followed by the issuance of a letter by the Regent of Bekasi ordering HKBP Filadelfia to stop construction of the church and to stop conducting their service of worship in the village. Since then, any attempt by the congregation to hold a service in the land they bought has been stopped by the residents. The dispute was later taken to relevant courts, all of which ruled that HKBP Filadelfia has the right to establish a church on the disputed location.

The congregation of the Yasmin Indonesian Christian Church (GKI Yasmin) still have their rights denied by the local government of Bogor, who refused them permission to build a church on land they legally own, despite the Supreme Court's judgement in favour of the congregation. A similar problem is experienced by the Batak Protestant Church (HKBP) Filadelfia, in Bekasi, whose Reverend was subjected to death threats by villagers. In the middle of 2012, it was also reported that at least 17 churches were closed down by the local government of Aceh Singkil, as the establishment of such churches was considered to be illegal.

The judgments of the courts have been ignored by the local authorities of Bekasi. This has given the message to the residents that they have the right to prevent HKBP Filadelfia's congregation from establishing the church or conducting a service of worship, and intimidation and attack against the congregation has continued. Reverend Palti Panjaitan has received death threats from the villagers. Stones, plastic bottles, faeces, and urine have been thrown at the congregation when they have attempted to reach their church.

Seeing the increased intimidation and attacks directed against them, the congregation of HKBP Filadelfia is no longer trying to hold services on the disputed location, but instead conducts the same in front of the Presidential Palace in Jakarta. The government continues to fail to respond to their demands. More information can be found at <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-087-2012>. And, an AHRC interview with Reverend Palti Panjaitan from HKBP Filadelfia, is available at <http://www.humanrights.asia/countries/indonesia/opinions/interviews/AHRC-ETC-015-2012>.

Shia and Ahmadiyah communities

Discrimination and persecution are also experienced by the Shia community in Sampang, East Java. The leader of the community, Tajul Muluk, was tried and punished under the blasphemy provisions stipulated in the Penal Code. His assertion that the current version of disseminated Quran is not the original one and his dissenting belief concerning the five pillars of Islam and six pillars of Islamic faith have resulted in him being sentenced to a two year term of imprisonment by the Sampang District Court¹¹. Later, in August 2012, approximately 500 people claiming to be Sunni Muslims attacked the Shia community in the same area, which resulted in the death of one member, injury to seven others and the destruction of 40 houses¹². The police had been previously informed about the imminent attack by the so-called Sunni Muslims group, yet it failed to take adequate

measures and sent only five officers to prevent the attack. A more appropriate number of security officers were deployed only after the attack was over.

There has been no evidence of the involvement of state officials in the persecution and discrimination against religious minorities, yet their lack of response and failure to keep being neutral have aggravated the problem. There were only three officers sent towards Ahmadiyah village in Cisalada to prevent the attack; the intimidation directed to the Ahmadiyah leader in Batam was performed with the acquiescence of a top official in Bareleng District Police; and police officers were present on-site when the Ahmadiyah mosque in Singaparna was attacked by a fundamentalist group. In early 2012, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono delivered a statement through his spokesperson saying it is not possible for him to intervene in GKI Yasmin's case as the Law on Local Government stipulates that such an issue falls within the authority of the local, and not the central, government. (13)

In some other instances, the security officers and state officials openly take the side of the majority groups by asking the persecuted communities to stop insisting, give up their rights, and conduct their religious activities somewhere else. The Indonesian Interior Ministry suggested the relocation of GKI Yasmin to a land provided by the government and called such a proposal 'a solution which benefits everyone'(14). The Regent of Sampang was also considering the option of relocating the Shia community(15).

In a separate occasion, the Religious Minister stated that conversion of Ahmadiyah to mainstream Islam will solve the tension between the two groups. Coupled with the absence of prosecution and trial against those responsible for the attacks, such statements and suggestions proposed by such government officials have sent the wrong message to the public – that it is minorities and their difference that is to be blamed for violence taking place.

As of today, there is inadequate legal protection for religious minorities in Indonesia. Criminal investigation of violence directed against minorities hardly ever takes place. Even when it does, the perpetrators are let off lightly, as happened in Cikeusik case, where those responsible for the death of three Ahmadiyah members were sentenced to only 3-6 months in prison. In the Cikeusik case, the prosecutors and judges applied the 'general' criminal provisions on incitement, assault, and destruction under the Penal Code. The using of articles under the current Penal Code in cases of violence against religious minorities is problematic as the Code does not include discriminatory motive as an aggravating factor. The Anti-Discrimination law, enacted in 2008, establishes discriminatory motive as an aggravating factor yet is only applicable in cases concerning ethnic and racial discrimination, but not religious one.

Footnotes

9 ELSAM First Quarter of 2012 report, *supra* note 4, p. 10

10 The AHRC documented several cases of attacks against the Ahmadiyah community in Indonesia. See, for instance, 'Ahmadiyah members in Batam are threatened, ill-treated and illegally arrested with the acquiescence of the police', available at <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-086-2012>; and 'Police failed to protect Ahmadiyah mosque from attacks by Islamic fundamentalist group in Singaparna', available at <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-071-2012>

11 In its written statement submitted to the 20th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, the Asian Legal Resource Centre, AHRC's sister organisation, expressed its concern on the trial of Tajul Muluk. See 'INDONESIA: Blasphemy law should be repealed to show Indonesia's commitment to the protection of freedom of expression', available at <http://www.alrc.net/doc/mainfile.php/hrc20/718/>

12 'Police's failure to protect the Shia minority in Sampang resulted in the death of a person, many others injured and houses were burnt', states an AHRC Urgent Appeal, available at <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-164-2012>

13 Such a statement was delivered by the President's spokesperson, Julian Aldrian Pasha, to the press. As reported by Suara Pembaruan, 'UU Pemda Halangi Presiden Tangani GKI Yasmin' ('Local Government Law prevents the President to deal with GKI Yasmin'), accessed on September 2012 at <http://www.suarapembaruan.com/home/uu-pemda-halangi-presiden-tangani-gki-yasmin/16876>

14 'INDONESIA: Religious minorities' relocation is not a solution' – a statement issued by the AHRC, on 11 September 2012, available at <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-182-2012>

15 'Shia group offered relocation', *The Jakarta Post*, 8 September, 2012

Indigenous communities want religion scrubbed from ID cards

By Amir Tejo

Jakarta Globe (28.11.2012) - A coalition of indigenous tribes urged the Indonesian government to omit a citizen's religion from national identification cards on Wednesday, arguing that an adherence to six official religions fails recognize their traditional faiths.

More than 700 representatives from 300 traditional communities from across the archipelago voiced their opinion during the closing ceremony of the National Congress of Faiths To One and Only God on Wednesday.

"ID cards only displays six religions, not traditional faiths," congress chairman A. Latif said.

Indonesia only recognizes six official religions: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism and Confucianism. Some of the nation's traditional indigenous people practice forms of animism that predate the six official religions' dominance in Indonesia.

But practitioners of traditional religions have to choose one of the official faiths when applying for a national ID card.

"To justly accommodate the beliefs of cultural and traditional faith communities, the religion section must be omitted," Latif said.

The congress also recommended the government institute moral education classes in the national curriculum and urged lawmakers to pass a law protecting the free practice of traditional faiths.

The Ministry of Education and Culture said it would bring the recommendations to the House of Representatives, but said it could not guarantee any action.

"The government's authority is limited because it has to coordinate with the House of Representatives, so the government will ask for support from cultural communities," said Gendro Nur Hadi, director of traditional faith development at the ministry.

Gendro told the assembled people that the government would not turn a blind eye to the nation's traditional faiths.

Jakarta Seminar examines freedom of religion and belief

By Mark Barwick, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) participated in an October 24th-25th seminar in Jakarta, Indonesia, as part of a series of human rights dialogues between the EU and Indonesia, organized and funded by

One of the working groups focused on challenges to the Freedom of Religion and Belief in Europe and in Indonesia. Dr Henk J. Thieleman of Utrecht University opened the session by speaking of religion as both "a precious gift and a mixed blessing." Religion not only reinforces group identity, he said; it can also be used as "camouflage" for political interests, distort reality and amplify conflicts.

In another presentation, Zuhairi Misrawi of the Moderate Muslim Society in Indonesia contended that despite recent reports of religious intolerance and violence in his country, religious diversity remains a cherished value in Indonesia. However, extreme elements of the majority have used Indonesia's blasphemy law to target minority groups and their adherents. Perpetrators of violent acts have operated with impunity and in defiance of the rule of law.

Participants in the dialogue acknowledged that worrisome signs of religious intolerance have also been noted in Europe of late. There is need to discuss the negative impact of blasphemy laws that remain in force not only in Indonesia but in some European countries as well. The urgency for building respect and tolerance for all religious groups was emphasised throughout the session. As European and Indonesian societies celebrate the traditions of pluralism that already exist in their respective countries, it was concluded, that the freedom of religion and belief can be upheld.

Indonesia: Timeline of religious intolerance events in 2012

By Jordan McMurtrey for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

February 11

In Mangseng village in Perwira Town, Bekasi, some 30 kilometers (19 miles) from Jakarta, the Batak Protestant Church Kaliabang (HKBP), Merciful Christ Church of Indonesia (GKRI) and a Pentecostal Church in Indonesia (GPdI) were closed because they did not have building permits. Hearing that their churches would be closed, the primarily female congregations had gathered at their respective sites by 8 a.m., praying and crying, before some 1,000 police officers sealed the three buildings.

February 23

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declined to enforce a Supreme Court ruling that a local government allow a West Java church to worship in its building.

March 14

A group of some 60 members of the Yasmin Church staged a peaceful demonstration in front of the Merdeka Palace, residence of the Indonesian president, to remind the current office holder, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, of the principle of freedom of religion and worship.

March 16

Unidentified gunmen sprayed bullets at the building of the Indonesia Christian Church (locally known as the GKI) in Indramayu, West Java Province, about 100 miles east of Jakarta. No one was killed.

March 21

Public officials raided a church building under construction, forced labourers to stop, and fenced the area with barbed wire.

April 14

Local authorities closed down a small Pentecostal church about 15 miles west of Jakarta in Tangerang city, Banten Province, after members of the radical Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) attacked it.

April 30

Hundreds of Islamists demonstrated in front of the office of Aceh Singkil regency, demanding area church buildings be not only sealed but demolished.

May 3

An Indonesian atheist who posted the message "God doesn't exist" on Facebook and started an atheist page now faces up to 11 years imprisonment for breaching the most populous Muslim nation's blasphemy laws.

May 3

Seventeen churches were closed, including three Catholic buildings, one Huria Kristen Indonesia (Indonesian Christian Church, or HKI), and two chapels.

May 14

Someone set fire to a local church in Picuan, East Minahasa (North Sulawesi). Scores of homes and cars were also torched.

May 17

600 Islamists hurled bags of urine and ditch water at about 100 members of the Philadelphia Batak Christian Protestant Church in Bekasi, near Jakarta in West Java Province.

June 15

The Indonesian man who extolled the virtues of atheism and posted controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook has been jailed for two-and-a-half years.

June 17

The Center for Inquiry, a Washington-based humanist organization, launched a petition on behalf of Alexander Aan, a 30-year-old Indonesian civil servant currently serving a 30-month jail sentence for "deliberately spreading information inciting religious hatred and animosity," according to the judge who sentenced him. The petition asks the Obama

administration to pressure the Indonesian government for Aan's release and for better protection of religious freedom in that country, the most populous Muslim nation in the world.

June 19

A mob of Muslim extremists attacked a Christian prayer house in Aceh Province. The building was damaged and worshippers were forced to stop the service.

Religious minorities' relocation is not a solution

A Statement from the Asian Human Rights Commission

Asian Human Rights Commission (11.09.2012) - The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is disappointed with the decision taken by the Indonesian Interior Minister regarding the relocation of the Taman Yasmin Indonesian Christian Church (GKI Yasmin) from a land that they are legitimately entitled to, on to a place which will be provided by the government. To a national media, the spokesperson of the ministry, Reydonnyzar Moenek, called such decision 'a solution which benefits everyone'. He also added what has happened in the case of GKI Yasmin is not an issue of violation to freedom of violation but, instead, merely 'a usual problem between the Regent (of Bogor) with his people'.

Having met all the requirements provided by law, the congregation of GKI Yasmin acquired the permission to build a church in Taman Yasmin, Bogor, in 2006. However, a letter suspending the permit was issued two years later. GKI Yasmin took the case to the courts and, after a long legal battle the Supreme Court delivered its judgement in their favour. The Bogor local government was ordered by the Court to issue a permit for the establishment of a church which, to date, it has failed to comply with.

The congregation of GKI Yasmin has been repeatedly subjected to intimidation by fundamentalist and non-tolerance groups. The groups also delivered hate speeches against the congregation. However, despite the fact that incitement and hate speech is a crime in Indonesia, no legal proceedings have been taken against them. Instead, the police had assisted the groups in preventing the congregation to conduct religious activities on the land they legitimately owned by blocking the congregation's access to it.

Considering the above, the AHRC strongly disagrees with the view expressed by the Interior Ministry and its spokesperson. The relocation of GKI Yasmin is not anywhere near a solution, let alone one that benefits everyone. Bogor local government has taken the position of being non-tolerance which is not beneficial to the persecuted religious minority, that is, the Christians belonging to GKI Yasmin. Instead of a solution, the AHRC believes such decision is a violation to the right of freedom of religion which was claimed by the Indonesian government in the last UPR session as its 'highest priority'.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed under the Indonesian 1945 Constitution as well as in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Indonesia is a state party. General Comment No. 22 on Freedom of Religion set out by the UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights explicitly recognises the building of places of worship as a part of the right to manifest religion or belief which falls under the scope of protection of Article 18 of the ICCPR. The statement of the Interior Ministry's spokesperson saying that GKI Yasmin case is simply a 'usual problem' is therefore regrettable as it shows his poor understanding on human rights and freedom of religion.

Equally important, such statement is insensitive and disrespectful towards the victims and has downgraded the issue at stake.

The AHRC would also like to underline that intimidation and attacks against individuals or groups of individuals for their religious view is a form of discrimination which the Indonesian government should tackle seriously should it really be committed to human rights as it has always been claiming.

The AHRC is therefore calling upon the President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, to intervene in this matter. We wish to remind the President that he can no longer argue that his administration cannot interfere in the 'business' of the Bogor local government as he did previously because the decision on the relocation comes from the Ministry which he has the authority to legitimately influence. The President should also take all the necessary measures to prevent the relocation of other religious minority groups in other parts of Indonesia such as the Shia followers in Sampang, East Java. He, instead, has to ensure that those responsible for any attacks, intimidation and discrimination against the religious minorities will be brought to justice and the victims will be given adequate redress.

Atheists rally for persecuted unbeliever in Indonesia

By Kimberly Winston

The Washington Post (19.07.2012) - The atheist community has embraced the cause of an Indonesian man, Alexander Aan, who was beaten and jailed after denying God's existence on Facebook and posting cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Center for Inquiry, a Washington-based humanist organization, launched a petition Tuesday (July 17) on behalf of Alexander Aan, a 30-year-old Indonesian civil servant currently serving a 30-month jail sentence for "deliberately spreading information inciting religious hatred and animosity," according to the judge who sentenced him.

The petition asks the Obama administration to pressure the Indonesian government for Aan's release and for better protection of religious freedom in that country, the most populous Muslim nation in the world.

"We are hoping that this petition will promote Aan's cause and put it in the public consciousness so we can build a better coalition to get him out of jail," said Michael De Dora, CFI's director of public policy. "It should matter to all human beings any time another human being is being denied basic human rights."

Aan was arrested in January after posting "God doesn't exist" and cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to the page of a Facebook group he started dedicated to atheism. The group had 1,200 members.

A crowd came to his house and beat him, according to news reports. Aan was charged with blasphemy and persuading others to embrace atheism, both crimes in Indonesia. In June, he was sentenced to jail and a fine of 100 million rupiah (about \$10,600).

Earlier this month, Aan released a letter from his jail cell that thanked his backers for their "support and love." He added, "Without this I feel alone."

CFI posted the petition via We The People, the Obama administration's website where anyone can bring a cause to the White House's attention. They have 30 days to garner 25,000 signatures before the Obama officials will consider it.

Atheist Alliance International has also lobbied for Aan, pressuring the Indonesian government to release him and starting a legal defense fund in his name.

CFI has held two rallies on behalf of Aan, one outside the Indonesian embassy in Washington and another outside the Indonesian consulate to the United Nations in New York. There are also plans for a stand-alone website and a sign-on letter on Aan's behalf.

"It depends on what happens with this petition," De Dora said.

Officials turn blind eye as religious tensions rise

New York Times (18.07.2012) - The problems began shortly after Tajul Muluk, a Shiite cleric, opened a boarding school in 2004. The school, in a predominantly Sunni Muslim part of East Java, raised local tensions, and in 2006 it was attacked by thousands of villagers. When a mob set fire to the school and several homes last December, many Shiites saw it as just the latest episode in a simmering sectarian conflict - one that they say has been ignored by the police and exploited by Islamists purporting to preserve the purity of the Muslim faith.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, has long been considered a place where different religious and ethnic groups can live in harmony and where Islam can work with democracy.

But that perception has been repeatedly brought into question lately. In East Java, Sunni leaders are pushing the provincial government to adopt a regulation limiting the spread of Shiite Islam. It would prevent the country's two major Shiite organizations from organizing prayer gatherings and sermons.

Mr. Muluk is part of an increasingly threatened minority. Last Thursday, he was sentenced to two years in prison for violating a 1965 presidential decree against blasphemy by promoting a heretical interpretation of Islam. He denies the charges. Analysts say that Mr. Muluk challenged the Sunni-led power structure in his village, making him a target of local leaders.

"Most conflicts are hitched to local politics," said Ken Conboy, a security consultant who has tracked rising religious intolerance in Indonesia. "They're based in communal, ethnic, tribal differences, but it's something that can be wielded by community and religious leaders."

Only one person has been tried in connection with the arson attack, and he received a sentence for time served, leading to his immediate release.

Days after the fire, the local branch of the Indonesian Ulema Council, or M.U.I., an influential group of Muslim clerics, issued a fatwa, or decree, against Mr. Muluk, saying his teachings "tarnished" Islam.

"In Islam you have to be clean, focused and unified," said Bukhori Maksum, the chairman of the council in Sampang.

Throughout his blasphemy trial, Mr. Muluk appeared both stoic and incredulous. His wife, Ummu Kulsum, sat in the back of the courtroom.

"People in the village are trying to force us to join their religion," she said. "We will hold out, because it is our right."

Mr. Maksum said that Shiites in Sampang practiced Islam in a way that disturbed society. "M.U.I. Sampang has the obligation to respond to this situation because if we did not, there would be bigger problems," he said.

Intolerance has also led to attacks on Christians, whose churches have been closed under pressure, and on members of the Ahmadiyah, an Islamic sect many mainstream Muslims consider heretical.

The [Wahid Institute](#), a liberal Islamic research organization working with some national lawmakers to draft a law on the protection of religious minorities, reported a 16 percent rise in cases of religious intolerance between 2010 and 2011, including threats of violence, arson and discrimination.

Rights advocates accuse the police of turning a blind eye to such actions and accuse the national government of yielding to Islamic hard-liners for political gain. They point to a 2008 presidential decree that prohibits "proselytizing" by the Ahmadiyah.

Officials, however, deny that the 2008 decree or any of the recent anti-Shiite fatwas contravene the Constitution, saying they are necessary to prevent social conflict.

"If individuals practice a different form of religion, which is against the principles of other religions, this creates disunity and animosity," said Teuku Faizasyah, a special adviser to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Indonesia has opened up over the last 15 years, but the advent of democracy and the decentralization of power have also allowed a greater assertiveness by local religious leaders.

Analysts say many senior officials, including Mr. Yudhoyono, are reluctant to crack down forcefully on intolerance for fear of appearing un-Islamic.

"Five years ago this trend was only in the big cities," said Ahmad Suaedy, the executive director of the Wahid Institute. "But it's spreading very fast because the government has ignored this situation."

Shiite's conviction raises concerns about intolerance

By Ahmad Pathoni

"The Wall Street Journal," (16.07.2012) - Jakarta, Indonesia - While the Islamic campaign that blocked Lady Gaga from coming to Jakarta grabbed global headlines in May, human-rights activists say a local court's decision last week to lock up a Shiite Muslim leader for his minority beliefs are a more worrying example of the growing intolerance in the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation.

A court on Madura Island sentenced Tajul Muluk, a local Shiite leader, to two years in prison Thursday for deviant teachings "causing public anxiety."

"The defendant has been legally and convincingly proven guilty of blasphemy," said presiding judge Purnomo Amin Tjahjo, according to the Associated Press. "His acts, in principle, have insulted Islam."

During the trial, some witnesses testified that Mr. Muluk taught that the current Koran wasn't an authentic text, and that Muslims should pray only three times a day instead of five, and that the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca wasn't obligatory.

Mr. Muluk denied that he was teaching any of those points or promoting deviant teachings and said he would appeal the decision.

Akhol Firdaus, coordinator for the Task Force for Freedom of Religion and Beliefs, a non-government rights organization, condemned the verdict as an assault on liberty.

"This seems to be an attempt at sidelining religious minorities," he said.

New York-based Human Rights Watch urged the Indonesian government to repeal the blasphemy law under which Mr. Muluk was prosecuted and free him. The law, which carries a maximum sentence of five years, has been used in the past against members of different religious groups branded as deviant.

"The government needs to reverse the growing trend of violence and legal action against religious minorities in the country," said Elaine Pearson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Indonesian authorities have said they respect religious diversity and have called on citizens to treat members of minority religious groups fairly.

There has been a spate of attacks against members of religious minorities in Indonesia in recent years. Across the country, conservative and sometimes violent Muslim groups have prevented some Christian congregations from conducting services in their churches, arguing that the places of worship had been built illegally.

Meanwhile, the Ahmadiyya, a controversial Muslim minority sect, has also been the target of regular attacks by angry groups who consider their beliefs blasphemous. Ahmadiyya members have been driven from their homes and even killed by mobs and had their places of worship destroyed. Many mainstream Muslims think Ahmadiyya followers are heretical as they recognize a prophet after Muhammad.

In June, a civil servant in the province of West Sumatra, Alexander Aan, was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for insulting religion after he set up a Facebook group to discuss atheism and declared "God does not exist" on the social networking site.

Tensions between Sunni and Shiite groups have simmered for years on Madura, an arid island off the north-eastern coast of Java. After a December attack on Shiite Muslims in Madura, local authorities asked Mr. Muluk and other clerics to leave the hamlet to prevent further clashes, but they refused. Indonesia is predominantly Sunni, with Shiites making up less than 1% of its populace.

In April, prosecutors charged Mr. Muluk with blasphemy, saying that his teachings were contrary to Islam.

Umar Shihab, a chairman of the Indonesian Council of Ulemas, considered as the country's highest authority on Islam, said the conviction of Mr. Muluk was wrong.

"Shiite religious teachings are not contrary to Islam," he said. "If he was indeed convicted because of his teachings, that would be regrettable."

Mr. Muluk says his sentence was politically motivated and aimed at harassing Shiite Muslims, according to the Jakarta Post.

"This is about my dignity: As if I am an infidel. I have videotaped evidence that this trial was fabricated for political ends," the 39-year-old preacher told the newspaper.

Hundreds of Muslim extremists attack Christian prayer house in Aceh

By Mathias Hariyadi

Asia News (19.06.2012) - A mob of Muslim extremists attacked a Christian prayer house in Aceh Province. The building was damaged and worshippers were forced to stop the service. Local witnesses, who asked their names be withheld, said that the attack occurred last Sunday, during worship. The place itself belongs to the Indonesian Bethel Church.

The fundamentalist attack was apparently caused by a lack of building permit (Izin Mendirikan Bangunan in Indonesian), a claim Christians deny. More disheartening for the members of the congregation is the fact that the attack occurred under the eyes of the police, which did not lift a finger, except to place seals on the building after the incident.

The Indonesian Bethel Church where the attack took place is located in Peunayong, capital of the province of Banda Aceh.

The mob struck during Sunday prayer. Hundreds of attackers hurled stones and pebbles against the building, causing major damages to the structures.

Eyewitnesses confirmed that the police stood idly by as the incident unfolded, whilst worshippers had to evacuate the building, seeking refuge in a safer location.

Human rights activists and associations slammed the extremist raid, noting that it occurred in a place that had been characterised by relative calm and a "pluralistic environment".

Aceh, Indonesia's westernmost province, is also the only part of the archipelago where Sharia is enforced. Provincial authorities use a morality police, a special street-level law enforcement unit, to crack down on people who violate the local moral code.

Under Governor Irwandy Yusuf, a former rebel fighter, there was some degree of interreligious peace and harmony between the Muslim majorities and non-Muslim "foreigners". However, things have recently changed. As fundamentalists gained more power and freedom to act, religious minorities have come under attack.

In last April's elections, long-time exiled (in Sweden) former separatist leader Zaini Abdullah easily won on a platform centred on fighting corruption and enforcing Islamic law.

As signs of growing interreligious tensions multiply, local Christian communities have seen attacks and acts of violence, included the forced closure of their places of worship, increase.

Indonesia has a history of moralisation campaigns in the name of Sharia and Muslim customs, which are particularly rigid in Aceh. The most recent case involved a ban on miniskirts, a moralisation campaign led by ulemas against yoga and tobacco, and police action against people wearing jeans and tight skirts.

Facebook atheist jailed

By Kate Lamb

"Voice of America," (15.06.2012) - An Indonesian man extolling the virtues of atheism and posting controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad online has been jailed for two-and-a-half years. It is a verdict human rights activists say is a step backward for the majority Muslim nation they say is known for religious tolerance.

It was posting the words "God does not exist" on his Facebook page that first caused trouble for 30-year-old Alexander Aan.

The civil servant from Sumatra was beaten by an angry mob and later arrested, but it was not only for his admission of atheism.

Aan had also posted several explicit cartoons of the prophet Muhammad online, one depicting the prophet having sex with his servant, another that showed him finding his daughter-in-law sexually alluring.

Facing charges of blasphemy, inciting hatred and encouraging atheism, a Sumatra court ruled Thursday that Aan will spend the next two-and-a-half years in prison and pay a \$10,000 fine.

His lawyer Deddi Alparesi said the decision is unjust. The judges did not consider the facts, Alparesi said, as Alexander never intended to spread religious hatred.

The lawyer also pointed out that an Islamic professor even took to the stand to verify that Aan is "theologically anxious" and does not have anyone with whom he can discuss his thoughts on atheism.

While the charges of blasphemy and promoting atheism were dismissed, Aan was found guilty of spreading religious hatred under the controversial 2008 electronic transactions law.

His legal team intends to appeal the ruling, but analysts say it is another setback for religious freedom in Indonesia.

Like the uproar in many Muslim-majority countries following the 2005 publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper, the case has raised debate over the distinction between freedom of expression and inciting religious hatred.

Andreas Harsono from Human Rights Watch compared Aan's sentence with the few months Islamic hardliners were given for beating three individuals to death last year in Jakarta. He says the ruling is symbolic of deepening religious intolerance.

"It says a lot about the relative impunity of people that commit violence in the name of religion, meanwhile while those people who politely using no violence, no matter how controversial it is, is now being punished to 30 months in prison," Harsono said.

In other acts of religious intolerance across the country this week, a national book publisher was pressured into burning hundreds of copies of a book that allegedly defames the prophet.

In Aceh, religious conservatives demanded the closure of 20 churches and, last week, there was a move to ban the sale of tight clothing in the sharia ruled province.

Earlier this month, flamboyant U.S. pop star Lady Gaga canceled the Jakarta leg of her Asian tour after Islamic hardliners threatened to block the concert.

Freedom of religion is technically guaranteed in the world's most-populous Muslim nation, but Indonesians must adhere to one of the six official religions. Atheism is not a sanctioned option.

Blasphemy law should be repealed

A written statement submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC), a non-governmental organisation with general consultative status, to the 20th session, Agenda Item 3, Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression

ALRC (07.06.2012) - The Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) wishes to bring the attention of the Human Rights Council (HRC) to violations of the right to the freedom of expression and opinion that are being engendered through the use of Indonesia's legal provisions prohibiting blasphemy.

Religious blasphemy is prohibited in Indonesia under Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, with such provisions also being later adopted within the Penal Code (KUHP) under Article 156a. Paragraph (a) of this article uses vague language, which opens the door to abusive uses of this provision, to prohibit any acts and expression of views considered to be blasphemous, and carries a maximum punishment of five years imprisonment. A similar maximum punishment is also carried by paragraph (b) of the article, which prohibits any acts and expression of views calling for others to embrace atheism.

Alexander Aan is an atheist currently undergoing a trial at the Muaro Sijunjung District Court, West Sumatra. According to his lawyers from LBH Padang, Alex has been charged under paragraphs (a) and (b) of Article 156a. He is being charged with blasphemy for allegedly posting a note stating that "The Prophet Muhammad was attracted to his own daughter-in-law," and a comic entitled "The Prophet Muhammad had been sleeping with his wife's maid," which have been deemed insults to the Prophet as well as to Islam. His Facebook status update that reads "if you believe in god, then please show him to me," as well as the fact that he is an atheist and a member of a Facebook group, Minang Atheists, have led to him being charged concerning dissemination of atheism prohibited under KUHP Article 156a paragraph (b).

Alex was caught by an angry mob who visited him in his office after learning that he had put the "insulting" posts on Facebook. He was threatened by the mob and risked being lynched before the police took him to a nearby police station for his own safety. The

police, however, have failed to take any measures against those who intimidated and threatened Alex.

As atheism is a form of belief protected under Article 18 paragraph (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Indonesia is a State Party, atheists enjoy protection under the ICCPR. The propagation of atheism, therefore, should not be seen as a criminal act but, rather, an expression or manifestation of opinion by individuals who do not embrace the theistic belief. This is not only protected by the right to freedom of religion but also the right to freedom of expression enshrined in Article 12 paragraph (2) of the ICCPR. The article protects the right to freedom of expression in any form, including electronic and internet-based modes of expression.

Although freedom of expression is not an absolute right, restrictions imposed on it should meet the cumulative requirements established by Article 19 paragraph (3) of the ICCPR. The restriction should be prescribed by law which is compatible with the aims and objectives of the ICCPR, formulated clearly, and issued by the legislative body of a state. Moreover, freedom of expression should only be restricted when there is a threat to posed by it to the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order, health or morals. Propagation of atheism, as allegedly carried out by Alexander Aan, does not pose a threat to any of these. Criminal punishment should therefore clearly not be imposed as a result. The criminalisation of atheism, as stipulated under Article 156a paragraph (b) of the KUHP, is therefore an illegitimate, arbitrary and disproportionate restriction, not only to the freedom of religion, but also to the right to freedom of expression.

In addition to the case cited above, Tajul Muluk, the leader of an Islamic Shia boarding school (*pesantren*), is being tried for religious blasphemy. He is being tried by Sampang District Court, East Java, having been charged with religious blasphemy for asserting that the current version of disseminated Quran is not the original one. In his indictment, the prosecutor also highlighted the difference of Shia Islam with the Sunni tradition (which is embraced by most Muslims in Indonesia) concerning the five pillars of Islam (*rukun Islam*) and six pillars of Islamic faith (*rukun iman*) and has labelled what Tajul has taught as being "wrong".

Previously, in December 2009, an anti-Shia group burned Tajul's *pesantren* in Sampang and its Shia members also received death threats. Despite the fact that the arson and threats were carried out by a group of persons, the police named only one person, known as Musrikah, as a suspect in the case. He was later tried by Sampang District Court, which sentenced him to 3 months and 10 days imprisonment. The sentence given by the Court matched the duration of Musrikah's detention, and he was therefore immediately released after the Court pronounced him guilty.

The use of legislation prohibiting blasphemy is in itself flawed, and prosecutions and punishments under it are resulting in violations of persons' procedural and fundamental rights, including those concerning deprivation of liberty and the freedoms of expression, opinion and belief. The legislation is also enabling the issuing of discriminatory decrees against minority groups. Joint Decree No. 3 of 2008, issued by the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Home Minister and the Attorney General, which prohibits the religious activities of members of the Ahmadiyah faith in Indonesia, for instance, refers to both Article 156a of KUHP and Law No. 1/PNPS/1965. A similar reference can also be found in the West Java Governor Regulation No. 12, of 2011, concerning the prohibition of religious activities of the Ahmadiyah in West Java. Although the law and decrees do not actually overtly encourage attacks or intimidation against the members of religious minority groups, they are misinterpreted by several mainstream religious groups as legitimising their persecution. Before attacking the Ahmadiyah Baitul Rahim Mosque in Singaparna, for instance, a leader of the Islamic Defender Front (FPI) stated that the act that they were about to carry out was in accordance with the aforementioned decrees.

In 2010, several human rights organisations in Indonesia requested that the Constitutional Court review and repeal the religious blasphemy law, arguing that it is in violation of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees and protects the rights to the freedom of expression and religion, as well as the right to be protected from discrimination. However, the Court refused their arguments and stated that: "the Indonesian Constitution does not give any room for the freedom to encourage people not to have a religion, to promote anti-religion and to insult or stain religious teachings or books which are the sources of religious faith or to stain God's name. This element is what distinguishes the main difference between Indonesia's concept of state law and the Western one."

A Joint Declaration on Defamation of Religions, and Anti-Terrorism, and Anti-Extremist Legislation issued in 2008 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE Representatives on Freedom of the Media, the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the ACHPR Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, establishes that the concept of religious blasphemy is not in accordance with international human rights standards. The Joint Declaration further asserts that religious blasphemy is an illegitimate restriction of freedom of expression which should only be limited in scope to the protection of overriding individual rights and social interests. Views expressed in the Joint Declaration have also been reiterated by the Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of freedom of opinion and expression in his joint report with the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in 2006.¹

The issue of discriminatory laws, decrees and by-laws in Indonesia was raised by several states during Indonesia's recent Universal Periodic Review, on May 23, 2012. New Zealand explicitly recommended that the Indonesian government "Review existing laws and policies and repeal or amend where necessary to ensure their compatibility with the right to freedom of religion or belief, in line with Indonesia's Constitution and its international obligations." A similar recommendation was made by Norway, which called on Indonesia to "ensure that all ministerial decrees regulating religious life, as well as all local religiously founded bylaws, are in conformity with international human rights law." Switzerland also called on the Indonesian government to "review laws and decrees currently in force restricting the freedoms of religion, opinion, and of expression, in order to prevent any risk of discrimination." The Indonesian government accepted these recommendations, and the ALRC urges the government to immediately begin taking steps to ensure that these are implemented.

Indonesia also accepted a recommendation made by the Republic of Korea concerning the need to facilitate a country visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and opinion, and the ALRC urges the government to ensure that this visit can take place without delay or obstruction.

The ALRC is, however, disappointed that the government of Indonesia did not accept a specific recommendation by the government of Denmark, which, if implemented, would likely have a concrete, positive effect on the protection of the freedoms of expression and religion. This recommendation calls on the government of Indonesia to "amend or revoke laws and decrees that limit the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the 1965 Blasphemy Law, the 1969 and 2006 ministerial decrees on building houses of worship and religious harmony and the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree on Ahmadiyah to bring these laws into line with international human rights standards."

Given the above, the Asian Legal Resource Centre requests the intervention of the members of the Human Rights Council as well as its Special Procedures, notably the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of expression and the

Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, with the government of Indonesia, in order to urge it to:

- a. Comply with its international obligations, notably under the ICCPR, concerning freedom of expression, by revoking Article 156a of the KUHP as well as Law No.1/PNPS/1965, which criminalise religious blasphemy and the dissemination of atheism, as well as by putting an immediate halt to all prosecutions against individuals and members of religious minority groups under these provisions;
- b. Ensure effective, impartial and prompt investigations into all allegations of threats, acts of intimidation and attacks against members of religious minority groups, and ensure the prosecution of those responsible and adequate reparation to victims, in line with international laws and standards;
- c. Ensure full and effective cooperation with the Human Rights Council's Special Procedures, including by issuing a standing invitation to all its mandates and enabling a country visit by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of expression as a priority.
- d. Ensure immediate action to begin the implementation of recommendations concerning the freedoms of expression and religion that were accepted during Indonesia's second cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, notably those made by New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland.
- e. Accept without delay and ensure the swift implementation of the recommendation made by Denmark during the UPR, concerning the need to amend or revoke laws and decrees that limit the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the 1965 Blasphemy Law, the 1969 and 2006 ministerial decrees on building houses of worship and religious harmony and the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree on Ahmadiyah, to bring these laws into line with international human rights standards.

Uptick in church closures

Anti-Christian incidents on track to surpass last year's increase, group says

By Vishal Arora and Victor Ambarita

Compass Direct News (05.06.2012) - The number of violations of Christians' religious rights in Indonesia reached 40 in the first five months of the year, nearly two-thirds the amount of anti-Christian actions in all of last year, according to the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum.

The Christian minority in Indonesia faced 64 cases of violations of religious freedom last year, up from 47 in 2010, said Theophilus Bela, president of the group. Bela said he was worried about the growing incidence of violence and church closures, as his group recorded just 10 anti-Christian incidents in 2009. There were 40 such incidents in 2008, he said.

At least 22 churches have been forced to close this year, including 18 in the Singkil regency of Aceh Province that were sealed last month (see www.compassdirect.org, "Harsh Era Looms in Aceh, Indonesia," May 16), as local authorities either sided with or came under pressure from extremist Islamist groups in this Southeast Asian archipelago that is home to the world's largest Muslim population, according to Bela.

The closures in Aceh followed last month's election of a hard-line Islamic governor. Bela said that after his organization's intervention the closed churches in Aceh began

worshipping again on May 13, but unconfirmed reports indicate other churches in the area have since been forced to close.

Violence against Christians has also increased, with most incidents taking place in areas surrounding Jakarta and Singkil, said Bela, who is also secretary general of the Indonesian Committee on Religion and Peace, a group that promotes inter-religious dialogue.

Besides a May 17 incident in which 600 Islamists hurled bags of urine and ditchwater at about 100 members of the Philadelphia Batak Christian Protestant Church in Bekasi, near Jakarta in West Java Province, local authorities closed down a small Pentecostal church about 15 miles west of Jakarta in Tangerang city, Banten Province, after members of the radical Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) attacked it on April 14, Bela said.

It was the second attack this year on the Gereja Pentakosta di Indonesia (GPdI) church by FPI extremists, driving 38-year-old pastor Abraham Boys into hiding and forcing him to seek asylum in the United States, Bela added.

Earlier, local authorities in Padang, West Sumatra Province, revoked the building permit of a Catholic church, St. Ignatius, telling the congregation to move to another location, Bela said. On March 21, public officials raided the church building under construction, forced laborers to stop and fenced the area with barbed wire.

Church leaders, however, refused to move to a new location, and authorities later allowed them to continue to worship there, Bela said.

A few days earlier, Bela added, unidentified gunmen sprayed bullets at the building of the Indonesia Christian Church (locally known as the GKI) in Indramayu, West Java Province, about 100 miles east of Jakarta. While no one was killed in the March 16 incident, it terrorized the Christian minority.

In Pangkal Pinang, in Bangka-Belitung Province, authorities have refused to grant a permit to construct a Catholic seminary due to opposition from local Muslims, according to Catholic news agency UCAN. Officials suggested the Catholic Diocese of Pangkal Pinang stop construction and move the building to a neighboring village, though clergy said they had previously submitted all necessary applications.

Another GKI church, known as the Yasmin Church, has also been denied permission to meet for worship at its church site despite a favorable Supreme Court order.

Local Christians complain that the impractical requirements of a 2006 decree, the Revised Joint Ministerial Decree on the Construction of Houses of Worship, provide the pretext for Islamic extremists and officials to close churches, revoke permissions and delay building permits. It mandates religious groups obtain the signatures of at least 90 members and 60 area residents, as well as approval from the local religious affairs office.

Lamentations in Bekasi

Over the laments of wailing church members, the municipal government of Bekasi sealed three churches in February because they had not yet fulfilled the requirements of the Joint Ministerial Decree.

In Mangseng village in Perwira Town, Bekasi, some 30 kilometers (19 miles) from Jakarta, the Batak Protestant Church Kaliabang (HKBP), Merciful Christ Church of Indonesia (GKRI) and a Pentecostal Church in Indonesia (GPdI) were closed on Feb. 11 because they did not have building permits.

In the week leading up to the closures, the Rev. Demak Simanjuntak of the HKBP Kaliabang church gathered leaders from the three congregations, and they decided to collect the signatures required by the Joint Ministerial Decree - the 90 members and 60 neighbors who are not members.

"Even this is understood differently by different parties - they wanted the 60 neighbors to be Muslims, even though the decree does not specify," Simanjuntak said.

At a tense meeting with Bekasi officials on Feb. 10, the Rev. Hotman Sitorus of the GKRI church cried and begged to be given two more days beyond the planned closure date, as the church had planned a year in advance a special service on Feb. 12 for the confirmation of 24 people and the baptism of one, besides the taking of Communion.

"However, the government did not grant it to us," Sitorus said.

Hearing that their churches would be closed on Feb. 11, the primarily female congregations had gathered at their respective sites by 8 a.m., praying and crying, before some 1,000 police officers sealed the three buildings. Over the wailing of the women, Bekasi officials read an announcement of the sealing; they did not give a copy of it to the church leaders.

"All of the members and the elders were deeply struck because all of their efforts had not produced a result," Sitorus said.

The three congregations are still worshipping outside their buildings - the HKBP in a field next to its building, the GPdI congregation sitting on newspapers in front of their building and the GKRI members in homes.

Sitorus said his 150-member GKRI church has since secured 90 signatures of members and 60 signatures of area residents and submitted paperwork to town, district and Bekasi governments, only to have Bekasi officials return the application, saying it needed to be verified by local block captains. The building permit has not yet been granted.

"I entreat the area government not to make the process of granting a building permit for our church difficult," he said.

The pastor of the GPdI Bulak Perwira Kaliabang Tengah, the Rev. Hotman Sinaga, said the congregation had been holding services without problem since 1997. Then in 2011 his church and the other two congregations began to receive opposition from a group from outside their area of Kaliabang.

"We had been slack in applying for a building permit because we had been able to worship peacefully," he said.

Sinaga suspects that problems can be traced to the election of a new block captain, who belongs to a hard-line Islamic group.

"May the Lord touch and bless those who are against the presence of our church," he said.

Sinaga too submitted a building permit application to the Bekasi government with the required 90 signatures of members and 60 signatures of area residents. As churches in Indonesia often find, there has been no response by the local government.

The general secretary of the Indonesian Fellowship of Churches, pastor Gomar Gultom, said the church should continue worshipping even though the local government has sealed their building.

"According to Article 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, the government guarantees the right to persons of all religions and faiths," Gultom said. "Because of this, no person can deny another the right to worship."

Gultom encouraged congregations to worship each week without fear.

"It is true that when Christians are restricted, they spread," he said.

Harsh era looms in Aceh

Election of hard-line Islamic governor followed by closure of 17 churches

By Victor Ambarita

Compass Direct News (16.05.2012) – The election of a hard-line Islamic governor in Indonesia's Aceh Province last month appears to have opened the way for a crack-down on the minority Christian community, which saw 17 churches sealed shut in early May.

Emboldened by the April 9 election of Zaini Abdullah of the militant Aceh Party (Partai Aceh, or PA), hundreds of Islamists demonstrated in front of the office of Aceh Singkil regency on April 30, demanding area church buildings be not only sealed but demolished.

Christian leaders told Compass that, besides the usual pretext of lack of church permits – applications for which local authorities routinely deny or delay – the demands were based on a controversial agreement that Christians were reportedly forced to sign in 2001 stipulating that there be only one church and four chapels in the regency.

The number of churches in the regency had grown to 22, and the Diakonia Secretary of the Indonesian Fellowship of Churches, Jeirry Simampow, said that the demonstrators were upset with the Interfaith Harmony Forum for allowing the growth of churches in the area.

"The number of Christians has reached 12,000," Simampow said, adding that the church growth has not been accompanied by building permits. "Some houses are forced to function as churches, and some buildings are only semi-permanent."

He noted that there is a strong, systematic movement to close churches in Aceh Singkil based on the selective enforcement of building permit requirements, which are otherwise rarely invoked in Indonesia.

"This is the same thing that happened in Bekasi, where four churches were closed," he said.

Of the 17 churches closed, 11 belong to the Protestant Christian Church of Pakpak Dairi, or GKPPD. The Rev. Elson Lingga, GKPPD district superintendent, told Compass that the mob clamored for the demolition of the church buildings, and that on May 2 a new acting regent had agreed to the demand.

"This position was supported by the police chief, who said that the time for dialog was past – all he wanted was a schedule of the church demolitions," Lingga said. "It's not that

Christians do not want to apply for permits, but it is extremely difficult to secure permission even though we have put forth our maximal efforts.”

The church closures, which took place May 1-3, included three Catholic buildings, one Huria Kristen Indonesia (Indonesian Christian Church, or HKI), and two chapels.

Police accompanied by demonstrators, who were reportedly organized by the hard-line Islamic Defenders Front, undertook the sealing of the churches, reportedly padlocking the front gate and posting a sign stating, “In 3 x 24 hours, the regency government must tear down this church building.”

Aceh Singkil Police Chief Bambang Syafrianto, after listening to the demonstrators on April 30, had suggested that the Christians be given three days to tear down their church buildings, and that an enforcement team would be formed to demolish them if they failed to do so, Lingga said.

“The mob received this suggestion by clapping their hands,” he said.

When the enforcement team along with Muslim demonstrators went to the GKPPD church in Siatas the next day, however, dozens of wailing women met them; one woman fainted during the protest, Lingga said. Encountering this resistance, the team relented and ordered church elders to meet with the regent on May 2.

The enforcement team then went to Paris Lake district, where they were able to close three churches: the Biskang GKPPD church in Napagaluh, the Biskang Catholic church in Napagaluh, and the Catholic church in Sikoran.

On May 2, Lingga and the Rev. Erde Berutu, along with some members from the GKPPD Siatas, met Acting Regent H. Razali, who said the eventual destruction of the church buildings was “not open to question,” Lingga said.

The regent told them that he was not trying to destroy churches but enforce rules regarding the construction of houses of worship, he added.

The next day, May 3, more churches were sealed, including the GKPPD in Siatas, the GKPPD in Siompin, and the GKPPD in Mandumpang.

Local Protestant church torched in North Sulawesi

By Mathias Hariyadi

AsiaNews (14.05.2012) - Someone set fire to a local church in Picuan, East Minahasa (North Sulawesi). Scores of homes and cars were also torched. The incident took place on Wednesday but local media just reported it.

The small Protestant church is the only Christian place of worship in the area. Local authorities do not understand why it was the target of an arson attack. However, some residents blame Islamists coming from outside the area.

Dozens of cars parked outside the local police station were also set on fire.

Picuan is located in a mineral rich area and is a strategic site for developing mining activity.

A new mine opened recently, generating tensions within the community, with Christians also caught up in the confrontation.

The strange case of Anand Krishna

Indonesian Supreme Court throws out innocent verdict for spiritualist Anand Krishna, sentencing him to 2.5 years of prison

Bali Discovery (08.05.2012) - On November 22, 2011, following a trial that lasted nearly two years - prolific author, spiritual guru and front-line proponent in creating a pluralistic Indonesian society - Anand Krishna was found innocent in a South Jakarta Court of all criminal charges laid against him.

That trial, largely unprecedented in the annals of Indonesian jurisprudence, saw the State present a disjointed case in which the writings and teachings of Krishna urging religious tolerance and pluralism received more attention by the Court than evidence connected to the actual charges laid by a former female follower who said she had been sexually outraged by the spiritual guru.

The drama and intense media attention accompanying the trial intensified during a 49-day hunger strike initiated by Krishna and, later, the removal of presiding judge Hari Sasangka for fraternization with one of the prosecution's main witnesses.

With the trial process largely in tatters, highly respected and fiercely independent jurists Albertina Ho was assigned to continue and finish the trial. Reviewing the evidence and recalling key witnesses, Judge Ho wasted little time ruling the evidence presented by the prosecution was totally inadequate to support the criminal charges against Anand Krishna. Judge Ho acquitted Krishna of all charges and ordering a full restoration of his civil rights.

Unhappy with the acquittal and in seeming disregard for Section 244 of the Indonesian Criminal Code (KUHP), prosecutors appealed Krishna's acquittal to the Indonesian Supreme Court.

KUHP 244 stipulates that appeals cannot be brought to the Supreme Court when the defendant has been freed and declared innocent by the lower court.

Shortly after acquitting Krishna and following her fearless handling of politically charged cases involving tax manipulation by Gayus Tambunan and disgraced prosecutor Cirus Sinaga, Judge Ho was summarily reassigned to a backwater community on Bangka island.

Undeterred and taking legal refuge under a Minister of Justice 1983 decree that declared acquittals by a lower court could be challenged in the Supreme Court for reasons of "condition, law, justice and correctness," prosecutors appealed Krishna's innocent verdict to the Supreme Court. In taking the position that a Ministerial Decree has greater legal weight than a formalized law, three judges ruled in late July 2012 that Justice Ho had erred in her absolute acquittal of Anand Krishna, concluding that he was in fact guilty of sexual molestation of a student or a person under his supervision in accordance with Indonesian criminal code (KUHP 294).

In reversing the acquittal, the three judges also imposed a prison sentence of 2.5 years to be served by Anand Krishna.

Alarmed and outraged by his reversal of legal fortune, Anand Krishna, via his son Prashant Gangtani, has questioned the independence and objectivity of the Supreme Court's handling of the case. Krishna's supporters have declared their intent to seek judicial review of the decision by international courts and non-governmental agencies dealing with judicial abuse.

"I realize that taking these steps will embarrass the Supreme Court, but I will defend my father for the sake of truth and legal certainty in our country. I will bring this case to the International Criminal Court," Prashant told Detik.com.

Joining a growing chorus protesting the Supreme Court's decision, former Indonesian Minister for Research and Technology, Prof. Dr. Muhammad A.S. Hikam also expressed his concerns on Twitter via @mashikam expressing his "100% support" of Anand Krishna and challenging the legality of any acquittal being reviewed by the Supreme Court as a violation of KUHP 244.

Also protesting the Courts decision is the Humanitad Foundation (humanitad.org) - an international non-governmental, non-profit, self-funding organization dedicated to the promotion of interfaith and intercultural tolerance and fellowship.

The founder of Humanitad, Sacha Stone, issued a written statement saying: "It is a cruel irony that this good and caring man should be the victim of a miscarriage of justice in his homeland, the scale of which is presently unparalleled by any other judicial body in the democratic world.'

Adding: "When the rule of law is undermined, and when the integrity of those responsible for upholding the rule of law is compromised, it is the responsibility of all free people to stand up if our most sacred freedoms are to be preserved. A fair and public hearing, by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of a criminal charge, is a fundamental right of every human being on this planet. In the present case it is clear that no man of good will would consider the Supreme Court ruling against Anand Krishna to be either fair, public, independent or impartial."

Separately, Anand Krishna has vowed to fight the Supreme Court decision to imprison him by every means possible in order that no other Indonesian citizen's civil rights are similarly disregarded by the courts in the future.

Anand Krishna maintains religious and meditation centers in a number of Indonesian locales, including Bali.

Atheist in Indonesia facing 11 years in prison for saying 'God doesn't exist'

By Stoyan Zaimov

The Christian Post (03.05.2012) - An Indonesian atheist who posted the message "God doesn't exist" on Facebook and started an atheist page now faces up to 11 years imprisonment for breaching the most populous Muslim nation's blasphemy laws.

Alex Aan, a 31-year-old civil servant, was beaten up by a mob of people in his hometown in Pulau Punjung after he posted the comment, which included an image of the prophet Muhammad, and was then arrested and charged for blasphemy. Although Indonesia has

freedom of religion laws, those only apply to people of six faiths: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

The atheist is officially being charged with "insulting a major religion," which carries a maximum five-year prison sentence, but he might also get an additional six years for using the Internet to spread such "blasphemous" messages. It is believed that Aan is the first Indonesian to be tried under the state's philosophy, which requires belief in one God. The government does not allow for not believing in God, as noted in the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report.

"He expressed his intention to convert to Islam but he has not performed an Islamic declaration of faith. Even if he does so, he still can't escape from justice due to his blasphemous act," said Jakarta police chief Chairul Aziz.

Some people on the atheist Facebook page that he started went as far as to call for his beheading.

"These atheists should be beheaded, that's what they deserve," wrote Putra Tama, a Muslim from neighboring Jambi province.

Currently, Aan is being held in jail and awaiting an imminent verdict that will decide his fate.

"The truth is way too dangerous," Aan expressed in an interview with the Guardian. "I'm really worried about my future. And I'm only just now starting to think about how I'm going to deal with it."

Aan also revealed he was beaten by a group of inmates in the previous jail where he was kept, after the prisoners found out that he had committed blasphemy against Islam.

"What Alex has 'done' is exercise freedom of expression," said Taufik Fajrin, one of the five lawyers who will be representing his case. "We'll try our best to get him freed but just hope he'll get a minimum sentence.

Promoting human rights here is hard because you face fanatics and hardline culturalists. Even we, as his lawyers, are worried that hardliners will come to our office or homes and throw stones at us. It's a challenge."

By the lawyers' estimates, there might be up to 2,000 atheists in Indonesia – in a country of 240 million citizens where the vast majority are Muslims.

Yasmin Church members stage peaceful protest in front of Yudhoyono's residence

AsiaNews (14.03.12) - A group of some 60 members of the Yasmin Church on Sunday staged a peaceful demonstration in front of the Merdeka Palace, residence of the Indonesian president, to remind the current office holder, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, of the principle of freedom of religion and worship. As part of their initiative, they set up stalls showing arts and craft made by children.

The Yasmin Church community in Bogor (West Java) has been in row for a long time with local authorities who forcibly shut down their church. By staging a peaceful protest, Church members want to win the president over to their cause and convince him to change attitudes on the matter.

Despite a ruling by the Supreme Court in favor of the Christians, Mr Yudhoyono has refused to take a stance in the controversial matter that pits Christians against Bogor Mayor Diani Budiarto and Muslim extremists.

In a press release, the Yasmin Church members called on the president "to come out to see what our children have made to see how pure they are. We teach them positive values so that they can be honest citizens and respect others," Christian leaders said. In their statements, parents want to see their children become "good adults who show respect for others and love the multiethnic nation that is Indonesia."

As a final point on behalf of the children, the representatives of the Yasmin Church asked, "Why must we pray in the street like travelers instead of using the church" as ruled by the judges of the Supreme Court?

Bondan Gunawan, former state secretary under President Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid, joined the peaceful rally. Dozens of human rights activists, including the younger sister of the former president, were also present.

The president of the World Council of Churches, Rev Soritua A E Nabadan, expressed his "full solidarity" with the Yasmin Church members. Speaking to AsiaNews, a spokesman for the Yasmin Church said that for Rev Nabadan, the Church's fight "is an example of the struggle for social justice in the country" and that he hopes to "see an end to all forms of discrimination."

For months, the Yasmin Protestant Church has been the victim of the local mayor, Diani Budiarto, who has disregarded a Supreme Court decision in favor of Christians. By preventing them from worshiping in their church, he has violated their right to religious freedom.

Even though the building meets all the legal and practical requirements needed for places of worship, the mayor in October deployed security forces to stop worshipers from using the venue for religious services. In addition, he has prevented them from worshiping in the street as well.

Indonesian president sidesteps church controversy

Declines to enforce Supreme Court ruling that GKI permit be reinstated

By Victor Ambarita

Compass Direct News (23.02.12) – In a defeat for the rule of law in Indonesia, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has declined to enforce a Supreme Court ruling that a local government allow a West Java church to worship in its building.

The Bogor city government revoked the building permit of the Christian Church of Indonesia (Gereja Kristen Indonesia, or GKI) Yasmin church in February 2008; the Supreme Court ordered it be reinstated in December 2010, but Bogor Mayor Dhani Budiarto has refused.

President Yudhoyono said on Feb. 13 that he would hand the matter back to the Bogor municipal government and the Ministry of Religion.

"I have turned over [the issue] to the Bogor city government assisted by the minister of Religion, so that worship may be held at the church just as other faiths in this country do," he said at a televised press conference.

Yudhoyono later told reporters that such matters should be handled by local administrations in accordance with the Indonesia's regional autonomy law, according to *The Jakarta Post*.

The president's statement constitutes "a false argument to give legitimacy to his decision for not getting involved in the dispute," lawmaker Eva Kusuma Sundari of the Indonesian Democratic Party told the *Post*.

At the press conference, Yudhoyono said he hoped the problem could be settled in a manner that satisfies all parties, and that the government is serious in implementing the 1945 Constitution, which states that every citizen should be able to worship in a peaceful orderly manner.

Other such cases have arisen since 2002, he said, adding that he hoped the respective mayors, regents and governors could resolve them.

"I want Christians to be able to worship in this country," he said.

Yudhoyono said he hoped that an extra-legal solution – presumably some kind of local agreement, even though the parties in dispute are at an impasse – would lead to quick implementation of the Supreme Court decision to reinstate the GKI Yasmin church permit.

Worship at National Palace

The GKI congregation, along with sympathizers from other religious faiths, has held worship services three times in front of the National Palace.

Now forbidden to worship even on the roadside strip in front of the building that Bogor municipal government has sealed, the congregation gathered at 1 p.m. on Feb. 12, enthusiastic but hot under umbrellas. The service lasted 30 minutes and was led by the Rev. Ujang Tanusaputra.

Church lawyer Jayadi Damanik said afterward that the service took place in front of the National Palace to remind Yudhoyono and other government officials not to close their eyes to the plight of the church. He said he hoped that the central government would take concrete steps to stop GKI Yasmin's experience of discrimination, threats and prohibition of worship.

The Coordinator of Religious Freedom Defense Team, Saor Siagian, said that if the president does not order Bogor Mayor Budiarto to carry out the decision of the Supreme Court to remove the seal on GKI Yasmin, then the president will have become a "provocateur."

"Yes, the president will be a provocateur because he was not firm with his underling, the mayor of Bogor, who refuses to carry out the decision of the Supreme Court," Saor Siagian told the gathered crowd.

Expelled

The Indonesian president's appeal for local authorities to work out an agreement with the church came five days after Islamic political parties in the Muslim-majority nation had church representatives ejected from a meeting with the minister of Religion and others.

After twice cancelling meetings, the House of Representatives held a meeting with the coordinating minister for Politics, Law, and Order, the minister of Religion, the minister of the Interior, the Ombudsman and GKI Yasmin church officials on Feb. 8. The GKI delegation included the spokesperson, the lawyer, the pastor, elders and church members along with interfaith groups such as the Islamic Anshor Youth Movement, the Unity in Diversity Alliance, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace and others.

Representatives from Islamic parties such as the Unified Development Party and the Prosperity and Justice Party protested the presence of the GKI Yasmin members in the room, claiming that other community groups from the Yasmin Park subdivision of Bogor had not been invited.

After 45 minutes of debate, the GKI Yasmin representatives were ejected from the meeting room and told to sit in the balcony. GKI spokesperson Bona Sigalingging said that he was most upset with the order.

"We felt that we were fairly invited here, and we had hoped to speak," Sigalingging said as the representatives moved to the balcony. "Nevertheless, we will follow the law and honor this body. We are very upset with the order [to move], but we are ready to obey."

Interior Minister Gamawan Fauzi told the meeting that because the issue was in the midst of a legal process, enforcement of the Supreme Court order should wait.

"We wish this thing to be finished nicely," he said.

He offered a temporary relocation of the congregation – the Harmony Hotel, 200 meters from the sealed church building.

"It would be a temporary relocation until the building permit problem is settled," he said.

In addition, Fauzi said that the Bogor government was willing to purchase a piece of land to relocate the church.

"If Bogor doesn't have enough money to do this, I will help as long as GKI Yasmin worships at that new place," he said.

He also suggested that the church stop worshipping on the roadside strip.

"It is best to worship in a building that the government has suggested," he said adding that he believed that the problem of permitting a house of worship would be settled amicably within six months.

The House committee requested information from the National Ombudsman, and Vice Ombudsman Azlaini Agus reported that there had been disobedience to legal decisions with the force of law, specifically the decision of the Supreme Court. Agus said the governor of West Java and the mayor of Bogor had not carried out the 2011 recommendation of the ombudsman to rescind the mayoral decree revoking the GKI building permit.

The recommendation was given, Azlaini added, so that the minister of the Interior could oversee its enactment.

"We have done our work," he said. "If our recommendation is not carried out within 60 days by the governor or the mayor, then we are to send a notice to the president, the House of Representatives, and to publish the news," he said. "That's as far as our duty

goes. The situation has not been resolved, which means that there has been disregard for the decision of the court, which carries the force of law.”

The meeting ended with the conclusion that the central government and the Bogor municipal government should resolve the GKI Yasmin problem by involving all elements of the community in a peaceful orderly manner – as soon as possible, but without a time limit.

After the meeting, the GKI spokesperson Sigalingging said that GKI Yasmin firmly rejects moving to another building. According to him, the building the government has designated is not suited for worship.

“We want a suitable place in accord with the recommendations of the Supreme Court and the ombudsman,” he said. “Because of this, we will not relocate,” he stated.
