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Seizure of 15,000 Bibles in Malaysia stuns Christians

Imports confiscated for using "Allah," a forbidden word for non-Muslims

By Don Fisher

Compass Direct (06.11.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.11.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Malaysian port and customs authorities have seized at least 15,000 Bibles in recent months because the word "Allah" for God appears in them.

Some 10,000 of the Bahasa Malaysia-language Bibles, which were printed in Indonesia, are in Kuching, capital of Sarawak in East Malaysia, and another 5,000 copies are in Kelang near Kuala Lumpur.

The Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) on Wednesday (Nov. 4) called for the immediate release of the confiscated Bibles. At the same time, CFM Executive Secretary Tan Kong Beng told Compass that the federation is striving for amicable relations with government authorities.

"We are open to and desire further discussion with officials so that this problem can be resolved," the CFM official said.

The CFM officially represents the three major Christian groups in the country: The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, the Council of Churches of Malaysia, and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia.

A strong Christian community in Indonesia, estimated 37 million by Operation World, has long produced large amounts of literature for export to Malaysia. In 2005 the government of Malaysia agreed to allow the use of "Allah" in non-Muslim literature, according to CFM.

"The government and CFM have exchanged letters on this matter previously," reads the CFM statement, "and we have a written agreement in December 2005 that Bahasa Malaysia Bibles can be distributed so long as the symbol of the cross and the words 'A Christian publication' are printed on the front page."

With the exception of the temporary suspension of publication of the Roman Catholic Herald newspaper in 2007 and the ongoing court battle over the weekly's use of "Allah," few problems were encountered in the policy. This past March, however, authorities

suddenly began seizing CDs, Sunday school materials, and Bibles containing the word "Allah."

Church leaders were stunned that no one had informed them of a change in policy. Quiet negotiations failed to resolve the situation, and several lawsuits began working their way through the court system. These suits challenge the right of the Minister of Home Affairs to restrict the use of "Allah" and to limit freedom of religion.

"To withhold the use of the Bahasa Malaysia Bibles is an infringement of Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, which gives every Malaysian the right to profess his/her faith as well as to practice it," according to the CFM.

A government official in Malaysia was unavailable for comment. Officially, the government says only that use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims could create "confusion" among Muslims.

The Kuala Lumpur High Court in Malaysia was scheduled to determine the legality of the word "Allah" in non-Muslim literature on July 7 but postponed the decision. The newspaper had been allowed to use the term until a final court decision was to be handed down, but the Kuala Lumpur High Court on May 30 overturned that brief reprieve.

The Rev. Lawrence Andrew, editor of the Herald, has cited examples from Malay dictionaries going back to the 17th century that use "Allah" as the vernacular translation for God. He has also noted that "Allah" is an Arabic term derived from the same roots as the Hebrew Elohim, and that the word pre-dates Muhammad, Islam's prophet.

The Herald has a circulation of 13,000 and an estimated readership of 50,000. The newspaper is sold in Catholic churches and is not available from newsstands.

While the issue is tied up in the courts, many are hoping for a more harmonious solution to the problem. Both Indonesia and Malaysia use variations of Malay as their national languages, and all translations of the Bible in both countries used "Allah" for God until Malaysian authorities decided in the past few years that it was an Islamic term that should be used only by Muslims. In so doing, Malaysia effectively shut off the importation of Christian literature from Indonesia.

Malaysia's population is about 60 percent Muslim, 19 percent Buddhist and 9 percent Christian. About 6 percent are Hindu, with 2.6 percent of the population adhering to Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions.

Malaysia Sikhs lose fight against man's conversion

By Julia Zappei

AP (06.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Sikh family lost a court battle Monday in Muslim-majority Malaysia for the right to cremate one of their relatives after officials said the man had converted to Islam years before his death.

The case threatens to revive complaints among non-Muslims that their religious rights are being sidelined—a grievance that has sparked interfaith tensions and severely eroded minority support for the government.

The family of Mohan Singh has been fighting Islamic authorities for custody of his body after Mohan, 41, died of a heart attack on May 25.

Officials from the Islamic government department of central Selangor state insisted Mohan converted to Islam in 1992, but the family said he practiced the Sikh religion until his death.

Malaysia's secular High Court ruled Monday that it had no jurisdiction in the case, saying that the matter of Mohan's conversion to Islam had already been decided by the Islamic Shariah court, said the family's lawyer, Rajesh Kumar.

Islamic authorities were expected to bury the body later Monday according to Muslim rites, since the Shariah court had already declared Mohan as a Muslim last month, Rajesh said.

Malaysia has a double-tier court system for civil matters-Muslims go to the Shariah court; non-Muslims go to secular courts. But in interfaith disputes, non-Muslims complain they lose out as Shariah courts get the final say and rarely rule in their favor.

The government has pledged to tackle legal ambiguities related to religious conversions. Authorities recently said minors can no longer be converted without both parents' consent, but the decision has not been made legally binding.

Officials have not announced any new proposals to resolve disputed conversions in cases where someone has died.

Ethnic Malay Muslims comprise nearly two-thirds of Malaysia's 28 million people. Minorities include ethnic Chinese and Indians who are mainly Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs.

Malaysia set to rule on use of 'Allah' among non-Muslims

High Court to determine whether Malaysians of other faiths can use the Arabic word

By Mathew Maavak

Compass direct (06.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (07.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - With the Kuala Lumpur High Court in Malaysia scheduled to determine the legality of the word "Allah" in non-Muslim literature tomorrow, what is at stake goes beyond the sanctioned name for God among non-Muslims in the majority-Muslim nation.

Such a limit on free speech in Malaysia is especially biting for Muslim converts to Christianity; already the Malaysian government does not recognize their conversions and marriages and still considers their offspring to be legally Muslim. With non-Muslims increasingly feeling the sting of discrimination and Muslim elites feeling a need to assert a national Islamic identity, the skirmish over "Allah" is clearly part of a greater cultural war.

Malaysian authorities and Malaysia's Roman Catholic Church have continued to lock horns over use of the word "Allah" in the Malay-language edition of the Herald, the church's newspaper, as they await the ruling. The newspaper had been allowed to use the term until a final court decision, but the Kuala Lumpur High Court on May 30 overturned that brief reprieve.

The Catholic newspaper has provided a panoply of historical uses of "Allah" among Christians in Malaysia. The Rev. Lawrence Andrew, editor of the Herald, quotes examples from a Malay-Latin dictionary dated 1631, and the Dutch-Malay Dictionary of 1650 lists "Allah" as the vernacular translation for God.

"This is testified by the fact that we have a Malay-Latin Dictionary printed in 1631, in which the word 'Allah' is cited," Andrew said. "To have a word in a dictionary means that that particular word has already been in use in the community prior to the dictionary. The word for 'God' in Latin is 'Deus' and in Malay, it is 'Allah.' Upon the arrival of the Dutch...a Dutch-Malay Dictionary was produced in 1650 where the word for 'God' in Dutch was 'Godt,' and in Malay, 'Allah.'"

According to church sources, the Malay term for "God," Tuhan, came into vogue only after deadly May 13, 1969 communal riots as part of a national unity campaign.

Andrew noted that "Allah" is an Arabic term derived from the same roots as the Hebrew Elohim, and that the word pre-dates Muhammad, Islam's prophet. Besides ignoring history, Andrew says, the government also conveniently ignores its universal use among Christians in the Middle East.

"Since the status quo remains, we will not use the word 'Allah' in our publication" until the court says otherwise, Andrew said. "In fact we have not been using it since our January edition."

Since 1970, the government of Malaysia has consistently championed Islam as a parallel source of identity and nationalism among the politically dominant Malay-Muslim majority. Dress codes, cultural norms and the Malay language underwent a rapid Islamization in tandem with discriminative actions against minority groups.

Christians were particularly hard-hit by the effort in the name of national unity. Licences are rarely issued for church buildings in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. New evangelical congregations had to meet at either hotels or warehouses for their Sunday services while Islamic semiotics and terminologies swamped the intellectual and official discourse. Conversion of Christians to Islam were particularly trumpeted by the media.

These efforts have largely failed. Local churches continued to grow, and the number of secret Muslim converts to Christianity began to rise.

At the same time, pandemic corruption and political authoritarianism have gradually led to a sense of disenchantment with political Islam among many. This erosion in Malay-Islam dominance has led to political bankruptcy, as evidenced by disastrous results for the ruling coalition during March 2008 general elections.

Given these political realities, Malay elites believe they can ill afford to be seen as soft on minority "encroachment," and observers say this need to ingratiate Islamists lies at the root of the tussle over non-Muslim use of the word "Allah." Officially, however, the government says only that use of the word among non-Muslims could create "confusion" among Muslims.

The Herald has a circulation of 13,000 and an estimated readership of 50,000. The newspaper is sold in Catholic churches and is not available from newsstands.

Malaysia's population is about 60 percent Muslim, 19 percent Buddhist and 9 percent Christian. About 6 percent are Hindu, with 2.6 percent of the population adhering to Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions.

Arabicization of Malay Language

The debate over "Allah" follows an effort by the government to promote the Arabicization of the Malay language at the expense of Sanskrit and Malay terms. When a Malaysian student has to refer to a pig in an essay or test, the required term is the Arabic khinzir.

Other Malay terms such as pokok (tree) and bunga (flower), long used to refer to loan principal and interest respectively, have been expunged from school texts in favor of the Arabic kaedah (base) and faedah (benefit).

Some sources indicate that the Arabicization of the Malay language, however, has come with unintended consequences, such as making Christian mission work and translation easier. Since the Malay vocabulary has its limitations, Christians can use time-tested Arabic-derived terms to provide meaningful context.

For a long time, the only Malay Bible available in Malaysia was the Indonesian "Al Kitab," which, included the word "Allah." As Bahasa Malaysia (official name of the Malay language in Malaysia) and Bahasa Indonesia are very similar, the "Al Kitab" can be easily understood by a native speaker of Malay. As a result, the "Al Kitab" was viewed as an unwelcome missionary tool by Malaysian authorities. Its legal status was heatedly contested behind closed doors during the 1981-2003 reign of then-Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad.

Significant Christian indigenous populations in East Malaysia use Bahasa Malaysia as a language of wider communication. The Malay-language content of the Herald reportedly serves just that need: using the national language with universal terms across a multi-lingual Babel of tribal Catholic communities in East Malaysia.

Malaysia bars conversion of children by 1 parent

By Sean Yoong

AP (23.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (28.04.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Malaysia announced Thursday it will bar the religious conversion of children without both parents' consent in a major step to ease interfaith conflicts that have strained this Muslim-majority country.

The announcement by new Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration follows a string of high-profile legal spats in which people who embraced Islam also changed their young children's religion despite protests from their estranged non-Muslim spouses.

The disputes have sparked complaints of discrimination by non-Muslims because Islamic Shariah courts typically rule in favor of Muslims, while secular courts that preside over family matters for non-Muslims say they have no jurisdiction over such cases.

Law Minister Nazri Abdul Aziz said the Cabinet has decided that when couples separate, their children should be raised in their original religion. He said amendments are expected to be made to the law to prevent conflicts from surfacing if one spouse converts.

"The Cabinet feels there is an implied and constructive contract between husband and wife that their children should be brought up in accordance to the common religion at the time of marriage," Nazri told reporters.

The move comes on the heels of a case of a Hindu woman who is challenging her estranged husband's conversion of their three children to Islam in a Muslim Shariah court without her consent.

Malaysia has a two-tier court system for family matters - secular courts for non-Muslims and Shariah courts for Muslims. Minorities complain that in disputes involving Muslims, the Shariah courts get jurisdiction and often rule against them.

Ethnic Malay Muslims comprise nearly two-thirds of Malaysia's population and dominate the government.

Malaysian wins court battle to become Christian

The Int'l Herald Tribune (06.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - An Islamic court in Malaysia ruled Friday that a man given an Islamic name at birth was a Christian, a rare victory for religious minorities in this Muslim-majority nation.

The man — whose original identity card listed his name as "Mohammad Shah alias Gilbert Freeman" — brought his case to the Shariah court in southern Negeri Sembilan state after the National Registration Department refused to accept he was a Christian and allow him to drop his Islamic name when he applied for a new identity card.

Lawyer Hanif Hassan said his client, who is 61, was raised as a Christian by his mother, and his Islamic name came from his Muslim father, who left the family when he was only 2-months-old. Freeman is married according to Christian rites and has three children who are Christians.

"The Shariah court ruled that he is not a Muslim. He is not practicing Islam, and he hasn't applied to be a Muslim," Hanif told The Associated Press.

He said his client was happy with the Shariah court's decision.

"This is a rare case but it shows that the Shariah courts are not rigid and are able to help resolve inter-religious disputes," he said.

Malaysia has a dual court system. Muslims are governed by the Islamic Shariah courts while civil courts have jurisdiction over non-Muslims. But inter-religious disputes usually end up in Shariah courts, and end in favor of Muslims.

Religious issues are extremely sensitive in Malaysia, where about 60 percent of the 27 million people are Muslims. Buddhist, Christian and Hindu minorities have accepted Islam's dominance but in recent years voiced fears that courts are unfairly asserting the supremacy of Islam, which is Malaysia's official religion.

Freeman sought the court's help because he said he was getting old and he didn't want any confusion over whether he should receive a Christian burial after, Hanif said.

There have been several cases of Islamic authorities claiming the bodies of people they say converted secretly to Islam.

Man fights wife over baby's conversion to Islam

AP (05.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (06.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - An ethnic Chinese man is challenging the conversion of his baby daughter to Islam by his estranged wife, a lawyer said on Thursday, the latest interreligious dispute to rock mainly Muslim Malaysia.

Hoo Ying Soon, a 28-year-old carpenter, was shocked when he received a notice two days ago from the Sharia court granting temporary custody of their 15-month-old daughter to his wife, said his lawyer Tang Jay Son.

He was told that his wife, Chew Yin Yin, 23, embraced Islam on January 28 while his daughter was converted on February 3, Tang said.

The couple, both Buddhists, married February 2007 in southern Negeri Sembilan state but their marriage broke down in September, he said.

"Hoo will challenge the conversion of his daughter in the High Court because it was done unilaterally by the mother without the consent of the father.

"They are not divorced yet," Tang said.

Religious issues are extremely sensitive in Malaysia, where about 60 per cent of the 27 million people are Muslims.

Buddhist, Christian and Hindu minorities have accepted Islam's dominance but in recent years voiced fears that courts are unfairly asserting the supremacy of Islam, which is Malaysia's official religion.

Malaysia has a dual court system. Muslims are governed by the Sharia courts and non-Muslims, civil courts.

But interreligious disputes almost always end up in Sharia courts, and also end in favour of Muslims.

Tang said Hoo's wife, who has adopted the name Siti Zubaidah Chew Abdullah, has filed for divorce in the Islamic court, a hearing was due later yesterday.

Hoo will seek an injunction in the Sharia court to prevent his wife from taking custody of their child, he said.

Malaysia to allow Christians to use 'Allah'

By Julia Zappei

AP (26.02.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.02.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Malaysian government has softened an earlier ban on the use of the word "Allah" by Christian publications to refer to God and is allowing them to use it as long as they specify the material is not for Muslims, a church official said Thursday.

The government had earlier argued that the use of Allah in Christian texts might confuse Muslims, who might think Allah refers to their God.

The revised order was issued Feb. 16 by Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar, said the Rev. Lawrence Andrew, the editor of the Herald, the Roman Catholic Church's main newspaper

in Malaysia. He said the publication has already started printing "For Christianity" on its cover.

The Herald publishes weekly in English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay with an estimated readership of 50,000. The ban on "Allah" concerns mainly the Malay edition, which is read mostly by indigenous Christian tribes in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak. The other three editions usually do not use the word "Allah."

The dispute has become symbolic of increasing religious tensions in Malaysia, where 60 percent of the 27 million people are Muslim Malays. A third of the population is ethnic Chinese and Indian, and many of them practice Christianity.

Malaysia's minorities have often complained that their constitutional right to practice their religions freely has come under threat from the Malay Muslim-dominated government. They cite destruction of Hindu temples and conversion disputes as examples. The government denies any discrimination.

Andrew, the Herald's editor, said although the order "makes things easier" for the Herald, the newspaper will not drop a legal challenge against the ban. A court is due to hear arguments in the case Friday.

The Herald is arguing that the Arabic word is a common reference for God that predates Islam and has been used for centuries as a translation in Malay.

Andrew said the new order is still a violation of religious freedom guaranteed by the constitution because Christians will not be able to use any literature that does not carry the warning on the cover, including much imported material.

He said most Malay-language Bibles in Malaysia are imported from Indonesia, which uses a variation of the same language.

"If this (order) is enforced, it will be difficult to possess materials ... from Indonesia, and thus practicing our religion will not be easy. This goes against ... the constitution," he told The Associated Press.

Andrew said the order also prohibits the use of three other Arabic words _ "solat," or prayer, "Kaaba," a holy site in Saudi Arabia, and "baitullah," or house of God _ without the warning.

Ministry officials could not immediately be reached for comment. Home Minister Syed Hamid's aide said he would not be available for comment until Monday.

Ban lifted on Malay section of Catholic newspaper

Government maintains newspaper cannot use 'Allah' for God

By Jasmine Kay

Compass Direct (09.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (12.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Nine days after imposing a ban on the Malay-language section of the Herald, a Catholic newspaper, Malaysia's Ministry of Home Affairs yesterday lifted the ban – but stipulated that the publisher must not use the word "Allah" for God in its Malay section until the matter is settled in court.

The editor of the Herald, which publishes in English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, was notified by letter of the decision to lift the ban late yesterday evening.

Father Lawrence Andrew, editor of the Herald, told Compass that the letter made clear that the conditions set out by the government in its earlier letter still stand. The publisher must print the word "terhad" ("restricted" or "limited" in Malay) on the cover page of the newspaper to indicate that the weekly can only be sold in churches and is meant for Christians only. Fr. Andrew told Compass the publisher will comply with this condition, which he said was not an unreasonable request.

In addition, the ministry has continued to prohibit the publisher from using the word "Allah" as the Malay translation for God. The ministry maintained that the prohibition must remain in place until the dispute over the publisher's right to use the word is settled in court.

Asked how the Herald intends to proceed, Fr. Andrew told Compass the publisher is preparing a reply to the ministry in which it will reiterate its stand in its Jan. 2 letter to the ministry that the weekly ought to be allowed to use the word until the court decides otherwise. He said the newspaper will continue to use the word "Allah" in its newly-resuscitated Malay-language section since the court has yet to decide on the matter.

"We will respect the law of the court," he told Compass.

A hearing in the court case is scheduled for Feb. 27.

In 2007, the government issued a series of warnings to the Herald to discourage the publisher from using the word "Allah" in referring to God in the Malay-language section of its multilingual newspaper. The government feared use of the word might cause confusion among the country's majority-Muslim population.

The publisher, however, maintained that it had a right to use the word and took the government to court over the issue.

Fr. Andrew told Compass he was pleased with the lifting of the ban, describing it as a "gift of God's blessing."

Since the publisher was notified of the lifting of the ban only yesterday, he said this year's first issue, to be distributed through churches on Sunday (Jan. 11), will be published without the Malay-language section.

Fr. Andrew told Compass the publisher will make up for the reduced size of its first issue of the year (24 pages) with a bumper second issue (44 pages) on Jan. 18.

The Herald is a multilingual newspaper published by the Catholic Church of Malaysia. Its Malay-language section caters primarily to its East Malaysian indigenous members, who make up significantly more than half its readers.

The weekly has a circulation of 13,000 and an estimated readership of 50,000. The newspaper is sold in Catholic churches and is not available from newsstands.

Malaysia's population is about 60 percent Muslim, 19 percent Buddhist and 9 percent Christian. About 6 percent are Hindu, with 2.6 percent of the population adhering to Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions.

Malaysia bans Malay section of Catholic newspaper

Restriction in place pending outcome of court case over use of word 'Allah'

By Jasmine Kay

Compass Direct (05.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (06.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Malaysia's Ministry of Home Affairs has ordered the Catholic weekly Herald to cease publishing its Malay-language section pending the outcome of a court case over the newspaper's right to use the Arabic word "Allah" for God.

The government also included two other conditions: The newspaper can be sold only in churches, and it must be printed clearly on the cover that it is meant for Christians only.

The three conditions were included in the renewal notice of the weekly's annual printing license issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs on Tuesday (Dec. 30). A hearing in the court case is scheduled for Feb. 27.

The publisher of the Herald has rejected the conditions imposed on the newspaper and on Friday (Jan. 2) submitted a letter of appeal to the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Father Lawrence Andrew, editor of the Herald, told Compass that the letter did not specify consequences if the newspaper does not comply with the conditions. Officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs told the New Straits Times on Thursday (Jan. 1) that they will be monitoring the Herald's actions closely.

Fr. Andrew told Compass he hopes to receive a revocation of the restriction from the ministry in the next two days, before the first edition of the weekly for 2009 goes to print. Otherwise, the weekly will have to be scaled down to 24 pages, down by a quarter of its usual size.

Murphy Pakiam, Roman Catholic archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, told the New Straits Times on Saturday (Jan. 3) that he was "perplexed" by the ban on the Malay-language section of the newspaper and could not see how the restriction was related to the court case.

"Even if the courts dismiss our application for judicial review, that has no bearing on the publication in [the Malay language]," he said.

Fr. Andrew reportedly said the ban was "unacceptable" and urged the government to "let the court decide" and not "jump the gun." In a report by The Associated Press (AP) on Saturday (Jan. 2), he described the prohibition as amounting to persecution.

"It curtails our freedom of expression and diminishes our rights as citizens," he told AP.

Earlier, Agence France-Presse reported Fr. Andrew as saying, "The constitution says Malay is the national language, so why can't we use the national language in Malaysia?"

Archbishop Pakiam told news website Malaysiakini.com on Friday (Jan. 2) that the publisher will consider legal action if it receives no response from the ministry within seven days or if the restriction is not retracted.

The Herald is a multilingual newspaper published by the Catholic Church of Malaysia. It typically publishes in four languages – English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil – with the Malay-language section catering primarily to its East Malaysian indigenous members, who make up significantly more than half its readers.

The weekly has a circulation of 13,000 and an estimated readership of 50,000. The newspaper is sold in Catholic churches and is not available from newsstands.

In 2007 the government issued a series of warnings to the Herald to discourage the publisher from using the word "Allah" in referring to God in the Malay-language section of its multilingual newspaper. The government feared use of the word might cause confusion among the country's majority-Muslim population.

The publisher, however, maintained that it had a right to use the word and took the government to court over the issue. This latest prohibition was issued ahead of the court hearing scheduled in February.

Malaysia's population is about 60 percent Muslim, 19 percent Buddhist and 9 percent Christian. About 6 percent are Hindu, with 2.6 percent of the population adhering to Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions.

Malaysia bans Malay-language edition of Catholic paper

AFP (02.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (01.01.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Catholic newspaper in Malaysia has been ordered by the government to cease its Malay language edition until courts resolve a ban on the paper's use of the word "Allah", its editor said Thursday.

Herald newspaper editor Father Lawrence Andrew said the move was part of a series of restrictions put in place by the conservative Muslim government when it renewed the paper's licence on Tuesday.

The Herald, circulated among the country's 850,000 Catholics, nearly lost its publishing licence last year for using the word "Allah" as a translation for "God," with authorities saying it should only be used by Muslims.

"The Constitution says Malay is the national language so why can't we use the national language in Malaysia?" he told AFP.

He called the ban "unacceptable" and said he intended to take action.

Andrew said the ban did not make any sense because a large proportion of Catholics in Malaysia are Bumiputera who mainly speak Malay.

The term "Bumiputera", or "Son of the soil", refers to ethnic Muslim Malays and the indigenous inhabitants in peninsular Malaysia and on Borneo island who are mostly Christian.

"More than 50 percent of our congregation are Bumiputera and two of our bishops are Bumiputera," he added.

The issue will be decided by the courts next month, while home ministry officials told the New Straits Times daily Thursday they will be monitoring the paper's actions closely.

Religion and language are sensitive issues in multiracial Malaysia, which experienced deadly race riots in 1969.

About 60 percent of the nation's 27 million people are ethnic Malay Muslims, who dominate the government. The rest of the population are mostly ethnic Chinese and Indians -- practising Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism.
