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Religious liberty threats pose 'real danger' in Indonesia, Burma

CNA (19.09.2013) - The persecution of religious minorities in both Indonesia and Burma pose dangers not only to the two countries, but to the region and the world, says a human rights advocate who specializes in the area.

Speaking Sept. 12 on "Radical Islamism in Indonesia and Militant Buddhism in Burma," a talk sponsored by the Hudson Institute, Benedict Rogers said that "there is a real danger of these situations feeding off each other."

He added that religious freedom threats in the region pose "serious consequences for the two countries and beyond."

Rogers is the East Asia team leader for Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a London-based group that investigates religious freedom around the world.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, has "been held up for a long time as a model" of religious pluralism and democracy, especially in Muslim world, he explained. However, "that pluralism is increasingly under threat from radical extremism and religious intolerance."

Indonesia's population is around 87 percent Muslim, and most Indonesian Muslims are Sunni. However, there are some Shia Muslims, as well as Ahmadis – a heterodox Muslim movement founded in the 19th century.

Rogers said that “a growing number of churches” and Ahmadiyya mosques “are being forced to close” because of local ordinances restricting religious practice in public places and the licensing of places of worship set in place by city governments, in contradiction to the nation's constitution.

Self-proclaimed atheists have also been jailed for public statements of non-belief. In addition, a vigilante group known as the Islamic Defenders Front stages protests and uses violence against Christian, Ahmadiyya, and Shia groups and congregations.

One Ahmadi mosque that was forced to close was the subject of such violence and discrimination. The imam and several members, Rogers said, stayed in their condemned mosque to keep it from being torn down by local government officials and Islamic Defenders Front protestors.

“We want the international community to know what has happened here,” the imam told Rogers. “Let the outside world know that we are not safe anymore. We are not free to believe what we want to believe.”

Rogers explained that while such actions are against the country's laws, parts of the Indonesian government are “complicit in what we are seeing.”

He pointed specifically to the actions of the president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose administration has been reticent to prosecute religious discrimination and other government officials.

Some government officials, such as the Minister for Religious Affairs, have “blamed the incidence of violence on the Christians and the Ahmadis,” Rogers said.

Burma – also known as Myanmar – also faces threats to religious freedom. In the country, which is nearly 90 percent Buddhist, both Muslims and Christians have reported suffering persecution.

Rogers noted the rise of “militant Buddhism” there, primarily against Muslims, particularly the Rohingya, an ethnic group who live in Rakhine state. The Rohingya have long been persecuted by the country's Buddhist majority, and in 2012, riots in Rakhine displaced some 125,000 Rohingya.

In addition, the state has engaged in the targeting of individuals in Kachin state, which is home to an ethnic group whose identity is “tied up” with Christianity, he said. Within the territory, Kachin people have been held prisoner and forced to participate in sexual acts with other prisoners.

Rogers said he feared that such persecution of Muslims and Christians in Burma may “call the attention of radical Islamist groups” to use violence against their Buddhist persecutors. He warned that the destabilization of Burma, and the upsetting of the tradition of religious tolerance in Indonesia, may set an unfortunate example for other nations in the region.

However, there is still hope, Rogers noted. In Burma, some Buddhists are beginning to speak out against the persecution, joining Christian and Muslim voices in opposition to the discrimination.

Rogers described meeting a former Islamic Defenders Front fighter, who became an advocate for religious liberty after speaking to his Ahmadi neighbors.

He also added that there is some public support for pluralism and solidarity with the persecuted in the country, displays of which have become more common as the country's 2014 national elections approach.

Still, "we just need more of them to counter this climate of hatred," he emphasized.

Minority groups ask Yudhoyono to turn down religious freedom award

Jakarta Post (11.05.2013) - A coalition of minority groups, who have long suffered persecution, are calling on President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to end their plight before accepting an award from a US-based group for upholding religious freedom.

A New York-based interfaith organization, Appeal of Conscience Foundation (ACF), is planning to present Yudhoyono with the World Statesman Award on May 30 in New York, when the President will be on a working visit, in recognition of his work in supporting human rights and religious freedom.

The coalition, which includes followers of the Shia and Ahmadiyah minority sects, members of indigenous faith Sunda Wiwitan, as well as congregations from the Yasmin Indonesian Christian Church (GKI) and the Filadelfia Batak Christian Protestant Church, met with Albert Hasibuan, the presidential advisor on human rights, on Friday to convey their message to the President.

The coalition also staged a rally in front of the United States Embassy in Jakarta on Monday to protest the ACF's choice of Yudhoyono for the 2013 award. The coalition requested that the US Embassy relay their message to President Barack Obama and the ACF.

"Before you are given the award, you should be able to act decisively to uphold religious freedom in Indonesia as stipulated in the 1945 Constitution," Bona Sigalingging of GKI Yasmin said as he read a statement to Albert in front of his office on Friday.

Local rights groups, including the National Alliance of Unity in Diversity (ANBTI), the Setara Institute and the Wahid Institute, also joined the move, saying the award was an insult to victims of religious persecution.

ANBTI coordinator Nia Sjarifudin called on Yudhoyono to be honest on the international stage. "We would appreciate it if the President no longer turned a blind eye to our plight. The world has acknowledged the religious persecution in Indonesia. Settle the matter with dignity, not by accepting some international award," she said.

The President, critics have said, has yet to be effective in addressing the growing intolerance in the country.

In his closing speech during a Cabinet meeting at the Presidential Office on Wednesday, Yudhoyono repeated his statement that the government wanted to intensify measures to handle such conflicts and he admitted that "there are still social conflicts [in the country]". However, he also said he wanted regional administrations "to be at the forefront in handling such issues" and "not to deny such responsibility".

On Tuesday, Yudhoyono said he had instructed administrations to settle such incidents swiftly. "Don't create an impression of omission; everyone must be responsible and take action until the problems are solved."

The Wahid Institute, which promotes pluralism and peaceful Islam, revealed that religious intolerance in the country had grown steadily in the last four years. Its report shows that religious intolerance cases in 2012 stood at 274, up from 267 in 2011. In 2010, the institute recorded 184 cases and 121 cases in 2009.

In a separate report released in late February, New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Yudhoyono had been inconsistent in defending religious freedom, and that the government had been complicit in the persecution of religious minorities by failing to enforce laws and issuing regulations that breached minority rights.

Building permit issues have been the most cited reasons to justify discrimination against religious minorities, while blasphemy has often been used against Islamic minorities, such as Shiites and the Ahmadis.

The Bogor administration ignored a Supreme Court ruling that stipulated that the building permit for GKI Yasmin's church was legal and ordered the Bogor administration to reopen the building.

Followers of nondenominational faiths have also said they could not obtain identity cards due to their faith and, therefore, could not apply for work.

"I will convey the message to the President soon," Albert said.

Persecuted pastor in Indonesia facing legal action after church attack

Barnabas Fund (03.05.2013) - A pastor in [Indonesia](#) is facing assault charges after his beleaguered church was attacked by a mob of Muslim extremists; a human rights group has supported him.

Police on 20 March named the Rev. Palti Panjaitan as a suspect in an assault case relating to an incident that took place when the congregation of his church in Bekasi, West Java, was attacked during a meeting.

Following the Christmas Eve attack, during which members of Filadelfia Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP) were pelted with rotten eggs, dung and plastic bags full of urine, the pastor was attempting to leave the scene with his wife when Abdul Aziz, the leader of the mob, moved to attack him. Palti stopped the Muslim's blow with his hand in order to protect himself and his wife.

Ironically, the extremist later claimed that Palti had assaulted him by hitting him in the chest. The pastor's account is corroborated by the fact that although many police officers witnessed the incident, no action was taken against him at the time. Aziz had intimidated Palti on a previous occasion and also threatened to kill him.

In an open letter to the UN, Human Rights Working Group - [Indonesia](#) (HRWG) criticised the authorities' handling of the case, saying:

[Rev. Palti Panjaitan] has been criminalised because he was defending himself from the violent attack perpetrated by an intolerant group when he held a mass prayer on 24th December in Bekasi.

The letter also accused "certain members of the state apparatus" of actively increasing religious intolerance in [Indonesia](#).

Referring to the legal proceedings, the pastor said, "These summons have been disrupting my concentration and my leadership of HKBP Filadelfia."

HKBP has in the past been subject both to mob violence by Islamists and to official harassment. The congregation were the victims of a [similar attack in May 2012](#), when hundreds of Islamists tried to block them from reaching their site and showered them with sewage, water, used oil, mud, rotten eggs, sticks and other blunt objects.

The church has been meeting outside and in homes since its building was sealed off by the authorities in 2010. Despite its meeting all the conditions for a building permit, and despite a Supreme Court ruling that one should be granted, Bekasi officials are still refusing to issue the permit.

Palti's case is the latest in a succession of charges brought against community leaders who were in fact the victims of mobs that attacked them because of their beliefs. HRWG has said that at least four have been prosecuted since 2011.

In one example, a gang of Islamic extremists [attacked the Pentecostal church](#) in Mekargalih village in West Java in January and assaulted its pastor. Instead of prosecuting the attackers, the authorities subsequently arrested the minister, Bernhard Maukar, and sentenced him to three months in prison for holding services without a valid permit. The church's attempts to apply for a permit have all been blocked by local officials.

Other churches in [Indonesia](#) are also targeted by the authorities. [GKI Yasmin Church](#) in Bogor has been subject to an enduring campaign of official harassment. And [HKBP Setu Church](#)'s building in Bekasi was demolished on 21 March after the congregation's applications for a permit had been repeatedly denied. During the demolition, church members looked on in tears as Muslim protestors, who called the Christians "infidels", cheered on the workers.

For Indonesian atheists, a community of support amid constant fear

New York Times (26.04.2013) - Karina is an atheist, but her friends jokingly call her "the prophet." That is because she is helping nurture a community for unbelievers in predominantly Muslim [Indonesia](#), where trumpeting one's disbelief in God can lead to abuse, ostracism and even prison.

"It's very normal for atheists to be paranoid because the environment does not support them," said Ms. Karina, 26, who uses only one name. But, she said, "in this group people don't need to be afraid."

[Indonesian Atheists](#) was founded with a Facebook page in 2008 and now holds regular gatherings. The Internet has offered its members a safe space to air their opinions, and

the feeling of community has made them braver about gathering in public. But recent prosecutions of people who made online comments deemed blasphemous by the country's courts have stoked fears that they too could come under attack.

"Members' growing outspokenness and courage does not indicate that other people increasingly accept us," said Karl Karnadi, 29, the group's founder. He lives in Germany and is candid about being a nonbeliever on Facebook and Twitter. Inside Indonesia, atheists are circumspect about their views, he said, and refrain from public criticism of Islam or any statements that could run afoul of the country's blasphemy law. Still, he said, that is an advance from a time when people were fiercely secretive.

"At first people think they're alone," Mr. Karl said in a Skype interview. "But after we meet each other, we feel like we're accepted. We're together if anything happens to us, and that feeling of community is very valuable."

While the Indonesian Constitution enshrines freedom of religion, legal protection is afforded only to six official faiths — Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. Citizens are required to list their religion on national identity cards. Violating the country's blasphemy law by insulting or interfering with the practice of one of the official faiths can bring a five-year prison term.

Concerns about the application of that law against religious minorities have risen amid an increase in religiously motivated violence that rights campaigners say is threatening a tradition of tolerance in Indonesia.

A [recent report](#) by the New York-based Human Rights Watch said reported cases of religious violence in Indonesia had increased by 20 percent since 2010. The Setara Institute, a research organization based in Jakarta, documented 264 attacks on religious minorities last year.

Those perpetuating the violence are largely militant Islamists who have an "uncompromising view of religious purity," said Phelim Kine, a deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch. "Compounding that is a complete failure by the Indonesian government to confront this violence and put a stop to it."

Officials say that while, under the Constitution, each citizen is entitled to whatever private belief he chooses, religious activities outside the home must be controlled by the state to maintain public order.

"Someone who belongs to one particular religion has also to respect other religious communities," said Nurkholis Setiawan, head of the center for research and development of religious life at the Ministry of Religious Affairs. "The state has an authority and an obligation to manage religious life in the public forum."

It has done so, however, through several regulations that Mr. Kine says have been used against religious minorities, including a ministerial decree that has prevented Christian groups from opening churches and the 1965 blasphemy law, which courts have used more than a dozen times since 2005 to prosecute Shiites, Christians and atheists.

Last year Alexander Aan, a civil servant in West Sumatra, was charged with blasphemy for posting "God does not exist" along with cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad on a Facebook page he administered dedicated to atheism. Months later another man, Sebastian Joe, was charged under the same law for insulting Islam, also on Facebook.

Both men were eventually sentenced to prison under a separate electronic communications law that prohibits the transmission of defamatory information through the Internet. Mr. Alexander was sentenced to two and half years for "disseminating information aimed at inciting religious hatred." Mr. Sebastian was sentenced to five years.

[A report](#) by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a global organization representing atheists and freethinkers, listed Indonesia among a number of Muslim-majority countries, including Bangladesh and Egypt, that have stepped up prosecution of religious expression in social media. According to the group, which submitted its report to the U.N. Human Rights Council on Feb. 25, more than a dozen people, in 10 countries, were charged with "blasphemous" statements on the Internet in 2012.

Despite concerns about attack or arrest, Ms. Karina is among the more than a thousand members of Indonesian Atheists, many of who are increasingly speaking out. In 2011 some members started another group, [You Ask Atheists Answer](#), a forum that aims to facilitate discussions about atheism in the hope of breaking down hostile stereotypes.

Because the forum is open, many Indonesian Atheists members use aliases to post comments that might offend militant Islamists who have attacked those they consider apostates.

Members' paths to atheism have varied. Some say they are from families whose unbending embrace of religion caused them to rebel, others say their more moderate upbringing allowed them to question religion's role in their lives. Most say the Internet has been a gateway to readings and discussions that have affirmed their disbelief.

Offline, they say the group is more than a collection of like minds. It is a source of friendship, a support network and a safety net. When Muhammad Ikhwan, who goes by Matthew Edison because his birth name is "so Islamic," needed money to repay a debt to his estranged father, he said members collected 30 million rupiah, or about \$3,000, to help him.

As the community has grown, however, so has the attention. An administrator of You Ask Atheists Answer said that he receives death threats and frequently gets messages demanding that he dissolve the group. He now uses a pseudonym on Facebook.

Some atheists say that if militant Islamists can violently attack other Muslims they deem heretical — referring to [raids on Shiite villages](#) and members of the Ahmadiyah sect — worse things could happen to them. "We cannot expect that the government will protect us," Mr. Edison said.

In February 2011, for example, hundreds of militant Islamists attacked an Ahmadiyah community in West Java and beat three people to death. A district court sentenced 12 of the perpetrators to jail terms of three to six months. The following month the same court sentenced an Ahmadiyah man wounded in the attack to six months in jail for inciting the violence. More recently, officials in Bekasi, West Java, sealed an Ahmadiyah mosque in a crackdown on what they called a "deviant" branch of Islam.

"The government is doing something wrong by not protecting constitutional rights," said Philips J. Vermonte, a researcher at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta. The state has an obligation to defend the rights of minorities, he said. "But that's what we don't have right now in Indonesia."

Mr. Karl, who said he had gradually renounced Christianity after years of reading books about science and religion and disillusion with religious groups who use faith to justify

intolerant behavior, says that, as long as the law is used to attack those outside the religious mainstream, Indonesian atheists should be careful.

In the meantime, said Ms. Karina, group members will continue to gather, in the manner she applies to her own life. "I'm open," she said, "but I'm not broadcasting."

Ahmadiyah sect under siege

AFP (19.04.2013) - A group of minority Ahmadiyah Muslims have been holed up in an Indonesian mosque since authorities shuttered it earlier this month, in a stand-off that starkly illustrates the religious intolerance sweeping the country.

The men were praying at the mosque in Bekasi, west of Jakarta, when scores of police burst in and surrounded it with corrugated iron fencing, brandishing a decree that bans the minority from spreading its religious beliefs.

Now around 20 of them are refusing to leave until officials guarantee they will be allowed to continue worshipping in the mosque -- and fear that if they do leave then the building will be taken over.

They believe it was closed under pressure from hardline group the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), in what would be the latest case of radicals targeting the sect.

In a notorious 2011 incident, a lynch mob clubbed, hacked and stoned three Ahmadis to death in western Java. The attackers received only light prison sentences, provoking international outrage.

The targeting of Ahmadis fits with a wider pattern of rising attacks in recent years against religious minorities in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, where most are Sunnis.

Muslim Shiites and Christians have complained of being targeted more frequently, and Human Rights Watch in a recent report accused the government of emboldening Islamic radicals by failing to act to curb the persecution.

Rights groups say the government is wary of facing down Sunni hardliners and voicing support for minorities for fear of losing popularity among the majority, a tendency they say is worsening as elections approach in 2014.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose Democratic Party is embroiled in a string of corruption scandals, is desperate to be "friends with everyone everywhere", said Haris Azhar, chairman of rights group KontraS.

"So when it comes to handling violations, he does not want to get his hands dirty and take on the bad guys."

At the Bekasi mosque, police and soldiers stand guard to prevent anyone entering. The Ahmadis inside have survived on food handouts from the local community and slept on mattresses on the floor since the building was closed off on April 4.

"Why are we treated like criminals when all we did was to worship?" cleric RahmatRahmadijaya, 33, told AFP through a small window on the locked back gate of the mosque, which backs onto a large, paved courtyard.

"They can threaten to attack and ban us but we are not scared. We will never leave our faith and will stay put at the mosque until they reopen it."

The Ahmadis say the FPI pressured authorities to close the mosque. While not admitting its involvement, the FPI has wholeheartedly supported the move.

The group's local head MurhaliBarda accuses followers of the sect, who number only around 500,000 in Indonesia out of a population of 240 million, of having "raped the word of God".

To close the building, the local government cited a 2008 ministerial decree which bans the Ahmadis from spreading their religious beliefs.

Despite a constitutional guarantee on freedom of religion, rights groups accuse the government of turning a blind eye to attacks and encouraging the likes of the FPI with the decree.

"The government has been weak in enforcing the law, so these hardliners have become bolder and often take the law into their own hands," said Bonar TigorNaipospos, deputy head of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace.

Hoewver, a presidential spokesman, TeukuFaizasyah, said that cases of intolerance were "not a true reflection of the harmonious relations among followers of different faiths in Indonesia".

"Indonesia is lenient towards Ahmadis. We give them the space to worship, unlike in some countries where they are completely banned," he said.

Indonesian minorities protest growing religious intolerance

AFP (08.04.2013) - Around 200 Christian, Muslim Shiite and Ahmadiyah leaders protested in the Indonesian capital Jakarta on Monday against growing religious intolerance in the Sunni Muslim-majority country.

The rally of minority groups followed the demolition of a church and the closure of an Ahmadi mosque, both in Bekasi, east of Jakarta, in recent weeks after pressure from Muslim hardliners.

The leaders -- most of whom were Christian -- gathered outside the parliament building, singing the country's national anthem and shouting "we have rights" and "stop intolerance".

They also waved Indonesian flags and banners emblazoned with photographs of the demolished church and sealed Ahmadi mosque.

"It's a basic human right to be able to practise one's faith in peace. Aren't we all Indonesians, why are we treated like the hated stepson?" Guido Suprpto, a pastor from the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia, told AFP.

The group also met with the chairman of the national legislature, TaufiqKiemas, to demand President SusiloBambangYudhoyono do more to protect minorities and guarantee religious freedom.

"The president must do something to stop the serious violence and discrimination against us and accommodate the needs of various faiths to have a house of worship," Suprpto said.

While Christians and Ahmadis -- who do not believe Mohammed was the last prophet and are regarded as heretics by hardliners in Indonesia -- have seen their places of worship closed, Shiites have been subjected to violent attacks.

In August, a mob of hundreds armed with sickles and swords hacked a Shiite man to death and torched more than 30 houses in the town of Sampang, East Java province.

Shiites and Sunnis agree on the fundamentals of Islam, but disagree over the question of who were the true successors of Prophet Mohammed as leaders of the emerging Muslim community.

Ninety percent of Indonesia's 240 million people identify themselves as Muslim but the constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

Indonesian congregation locked out of church for Easter

AFP (28.03.2013) - Local officials in Indonesia have left a Christian congregation with nowhere to pray this Easter, a priest said Thursday, the latest such incident in the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation.

Authorities in the JatibeningBaru sub-district on the outskirts of the capital Jakarta ordered the congregation to halt services at its church until it obtained a building permit, the Reverend MartuaRismanKurniadi told AFP.

They sent a letter to the congregation Wednesday after around 300 Muslims staged a protest Sunday at the Indonesian Christian Church, demanding worshippers stop Sunday mass.

"We are all disappointed and sad, especially since we have no place to pray to celebrate Easter," Kurniadi said.

He said the congregation had been praying in their semi-permanent building since 1994 with no problems, but the local community was reluctant to provide statements required to support the building permit.

"They said they were afraid others would call them infidels if they did so."

The church lies within the larger district of Bekasi, where Christians and several churches have come under attack by Muslim hardliners in recent years.

On March 17 the Bekasi district administration, also citing a missing permit, demolished a church in front of its weeping congregation following pressure from Muslim protesters.

Another congregation in the same district has been forced to pray outside its church for years, with hardliners blocking their entry. At times rotten eggs and bags of urine have been thrown at them.

Rights activists have said local governments are using the permit issue as an excuse to kowtow to hardliners, with churches and Islamic minorities bearing the brunt of attacks. They say mosque building permits are rarely challenged.

The JatibeningBaru sub-district's chief could not be reached for comment.

Ninety percent of Indonesia's 240 million people identify themselves as Muslim but the constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

The Setara Institute of Peace and Democracy, however, says cases of intolerance are on the rise, with 543 reported in 2011 compared to 491 in 2009. More than 300 incidents were recorded in the first half of 2012.

Call for end to church demolitions in Indonesia

Christian Today (29.03.2013) - Human Rights Watch is calling upon the Indonesian President to intervene to put a stop to the demolition of churches.

The call was made by Human Rights Watch following reports that a local government demolished a new structure of the Batak Protestant Christian Church (HKBP) in Bekasi, a suburb of Jakarta, on 21 March.

The demolition was reportedly ordered at the behest of the Islamic People's Forum in Taman Sari, a militant Islamist organisation, because the church did not have a building permit.

Videos of the demolition on YouTube show church members crying and begging officials not to demolish the church. As the building comes down, Muslim militants cheer and shout out Koranic verses.

"The government's demolition of a church in Bekasi not only violates religious freedom, but it will fan the flames of religious division in Indonesia," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

"President Yudhoyono needs to reverse the decision, compensate the congregation, and publicly order an end to the destruction of houses of worship."

He continued: "Demolishing a religious minority's house of worship because of opposition from the majority creates a dangerous precedent.

"The government may be unleashing forces that it will not be able to control."

Human Rights Watch said it was becoming increasingly difficult for Christian churches in traditionally Muslim-majority areas to obtain building permits.

West Java, where Bekasi is situated, is one such area where there has been an increase in the Christian population.

In some cases, it has taken churches over 10 years to receive the necessary approval. The demanding requirements include the names and ID cards of at least 90 congregants, a support letter from at least 60 other local residents, and written recommendations from the Religious Affairs Ministry and the Religious Harmony Forum, a consultative body of local religious leaders.

More than 20 HKBP churches are operating without a building permit, leaving them exposed to the threat of demolition.

HKBP Filadelfia has been refused a building permit by the local government despite the Indonesian Supreme Court approving construction.

Human Rights Watch said the government must revoke discriminatory regulations requiring houses of worship to be built with the approval of a regional administrator.

Although the regulations apply to all religions, Human Rights Watch said they were being used in practice to discriminate against religious minorities.

There are reports of Muslim militants using the strict regulations as justification for vandalising and torching so-called "illegal" churches.

Between 2010 and 2012, there were at least 30 documented church closures in Java and Sumatra, and one mosque closed in Kupang.

Cases of violence against Christians, Ahmadiyah and other religious minorities have increased since President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono came to power in 2004.

According to figures from the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, more than 430 churches have been attacked, closed down, or burned down since 2004.

Adams called for action to halt the violence against religious minorities.

"The government needs to recommit itself to religious freedom for all communities," he said.

"By providing principled leadership it can calm the situation down. But if it gives in to extremists, there will only be more social divisions and violence in the future."

Sumatra: eight dead and 15 wounded in clashes between Burmese Buddhists and Muslims

AsiaNews (05/04/2013) - At least eight people are dead and 15 wounded following clashes between Burmese Buddhists and Muslims in a refugee center for migrants near the port of Belawan, near the city of Medan, in the Indonesian province of Sumatra. The violence erupted after news reached the camp of the terrible events that took place [last March in Meikhtila](#) in the center of Myanmar, which have left dozens of casualties on the ground, as well as houses, shops and mosques devastated. The Buddhist-Muslim clashes in the center of the former Burma was also addressed by the Archbishop of Yangon Msgr.

Charles Bo, who, at the Easter Vigil, [launched an appeal for peace](#), now taken up by Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu youth movements.

According to reports from the Indonesian police, the clashes between Burmese Buddhists and Muslims refugees in the center of Sumatra began at two o'clock this morning. Initial reports state that the dead are all Buddhists, while the 15 injured belong to the Rohingya Muslim minority, often the victim of persecution and abuses in Myanmar. Three other Buddhists escaped the onslaught.

From the initial reconstruction it seems that the 11 Burmese Buddhists were fishermen, were caught on the high seas and then stopped by the Indonesian Navy and held in the center. The Muslims instead are part of a group of at least 100 Rohingya refugees, who have fled Myanmar in search of political asylum from the authorities in Jakarta.

EndroKiswanto, chief of police in the area, explains that the chaos began when the Burmese found out about the violence in Meikhtila, which caused a total of 43 dead and thousands homeless. Tensions rose until the two sides came to blows, with the authorities and security officials of the center unable to restore calm. Meanwhile, the Indonesian government leaders confirm that growing number of people belonging to the Muslim minority, who have left Myanmar to seek refuge overseas.

Judgement by the Supreme Court upholding freedom of religion disregarded by police and Bekasi local authorities

Religious minority group's leader in Bekasi is named suspect for blocking attack directed to him

Asian Human Rights Commission/ Asian Human Rights Commission (19.03.2013) - The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has received updated information regarding the case concerning the congregation of Batak Protestant Church (HKBP) Filadelfia in Bekasi. The leader of the congregation, Reverend PaltiPanjaitan, has been named as a suspect by the police after he previously defended himself from an attack by local residents of Jejalen Jaya Village. Rev. PaltiPanjaitan is charged with articles on light physical assault and offensive treatment under the Penal Code.

According to an interview held by the AHRC with Reverend PaltiPanjaitan, Bekasi District Police named him as a suspect on 12 March 2013. The charges imposed on him were regarding physical assault as prohibited in Article 352 of the Penal Code as well as offensive treatment under Article 335 (1) of the Code. The former charge carries a maximum punishment of three months imprisonment whereas the latter may lead to maximum one year imprisonment.

Charges imposed on Rev. Palti are related to the attack directed by local residents of Jejalen Jaya Village towards the congregation of HKBP Filadelfia on 24 December 2012. On that day at around 6pm, the congregation was marching to the location of their church to hold a Christmas Eve mass. However, at about 200 meters away from the church, their way was blocked by the local residents. The residents also threw rotten eggs, animal faeces, stones and urine at the congregation. Approximately 200 police officers were present when the attack was taking place, yet none of them took any measures to prevent it or arrest the perpetrators.

As the situation was getting worse, the congregation of HKBP Filadelfia's decided to leave and instead went to Tambun Sub-District Police Station to hold the Christmas Eve mass there. Rev. PaltiPanjaitan stayed at the location with his wife and some other members of the congregation. The local residents later surrounded the station and attempted to attack them. The police managed to block the attack from the back as well as the right and left sides. However Rev. Palti had to protect himself and his wife from an attack directed by the informal leader of the residents, Abdul Aziz. The Reverend used his hands to protect himself and his wife until the police later prevented Abdul Aziz from attacking him further. Along with the members of congregation who were still with him, the Reverend went back to the Tambun Sub-District Police Station.

Later on the same day, Abdul Aziz lodged a complaint to Bekasi Sub-District Police regarding 'the attack' committed by Rev. PaltiPanjaitan. His complaint was promptly followed up by the police that Abdul Aziz and some members of the congregation were summoned by the police during the period of December 2012-February 2013 for questioning.

While the police responded expeditiously to the complaint lodged by Abdul Aziz, this was not the case when it came to the complaint submitted by Rev. PaltiPanjaitan. As the AHRC previously reported in [AHRC-UAC-087-2012](#), Rev. PaltiPanjaitan received death threats from Abdul Aziz on 15 April 2012. The threats delivered by Aziz were recorded by an independent journalist and the video is available in Bahasa Indonesia on [here](#). Rev. PaltiPanjaitan later reported the threats to Jakarta Metropolitan Police yet his complaint was very slowly followed up by the police. Even though the threats took place in April 2012, as of today the police are still 'conducting an investigation' on the allegation lodged by Rev. PaltiPanjaitan. The police also failed to take measures against the residents of Jejalen Jaya Village who have consistently intimidated and threatened the congregation of HKBP Filadelfia. In his [interview](#) with the AHRC in May 2012, Rev. PaltiPanjaitan expressed his concern on how the Indonesian government is taking the side of the majority as it is too afraid of the intolerance groups exist in the country.

SUGGESTED ACTION:

Please write to the relevant authorities below urging them to ensure that charges against Rev. PaltiPanjaitan are repealed. Please also urge them to take serious measures against individuals who have been persecuting the congregation of HKBP Filadelfia and depriving their right to the freedom to manifest their religion.

The AHRC is writing separately to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Independent Expert on Minority Issues.

Sample letter:

Dear _____,

INDONESIA: Religious minority group's leader in Bekasi is named suspect for blocking attack directed to him

Name of victim: Reverend PaltiPanjaitan

Alleged perpetrators: Officers from Bekasi District police

Date of incident: 12 March 2013-present (ongoing)

Place of incident: Bekasi, West Java

I am writing to voice my deep concern regarding the naming of Reverend PaltiPanjaitan as suspect by Bekasi District Police on 12 March 2013. I have been informed that Rev. PaltiPanjaitan is charged with provisions on physical assault and offensive treatment

under the Indonesian Penal Code for 'beating' the informal leader of Jejalen Jaya villagers, Abdul Aziz, on 24 December 2012. According to the information I received, Rev. PaltiPanjaitan did not beat Abdul Aziz as accused but was only blocking the attack directed by Aziz against him.

I was told that on 24 December 2012, Rev. PaltiPanjaitan and the congregation of HKBP Filadelfia were marching to their church in Jejalen Jaya village to hold a Christmas Eve mass. However, the residents of the village blocked their way and threw rotten eggs, stones, animals' faeces and urines towards the congregation. As the situation got worse and the police did not do anything against the residents who were intimidating them, the members of the congregation left the location and were off to Tambun Sub-District Police station to hold the mass there instead. Rev. Palti, his wife and some other members of the congregation stayed in the area but the residents later surrounded and were about to attack them. The police prevented the attacks coming from different directions, but Rev. Palti had to prevent the attack from Abdul Aziz, who was in front of him, on his own. He blocked Aziz's beating with bare hands until the police later helped that he and the other members of the congregation could reach Tambun Sub-District Police Station safely.

I am extremely concerned with the lack of protection for religious minorities in your country. I am aware the attacks and intimidations towards HKBP Filadelfia and Rev. PaltiPanjaitan on 24 December 2012 was not the first time for them and that the Christian community in Bekasi is not the only persecuted religious minorities group exist in your territory. I am disturbed with the fact that leaders of the religious minority groups are criminally charged and prosecuted with unjust, vague provisions such as blasphemy or offensive treatment merely because they were defending their rights, whilst individuals who persecute and discriminate them are left unpunished. It is a big disappointment to witness persecutions of religious minority groups are taking place in various parts of Indonesia despite the government's commitment to attach 'the highest priority to the issue of freedom of religion' during the UN Universal Periodical Review (UPR) in May last year.

I am urging you to withdraw the fabricated charges imposed on Rev. PaltiPanjaitan as well as to provide him with rehabilitation. Equally important, those responsible for persecuting the congregation of HKBP Filadelfia should not be tolerated that criminal proceeding against them should take place. I am calling you to provide the residents of Jejalen Jaya village with the correct understanding that HKBP Filadelfia is lawfully entitled to establish a church in the land they bought, as previously ruled by the Supreme Court.

I look forward for your positive and swift response on this matter. Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

PLEASE SEND YOUR LETTERS TO:

1. Mr.SusiloBambangYudhoyono
President of Republic of Indonesia
Jl. Veteran No. 16
Jakarta Pusat
INDONESIA
Tel: +62 21 386 3777, 350 3088.
Fax: + 62 21 344 2223, 3483 4759
E-mail: presiden@ri.go.id

2. Ms.HarkristutiHarkrisnowo
General Director of Human Rights
Ministry of Law and Human Rights
Jl. HR Rasuna Said Kav. 6-7
Kuningan, Jakarta 12940
INDONESIA
Tel: +62 21 525 3006, 525 3889
Fax: +62 21 525 3095

3. Gen. TimurPradopo
Chief of the Indonesian National Police
Jl. Trunojoyo No. 3
KebayoranBaru, Jakarta Selatan 12110
INDONESIA
Tel: +62 21 384 8537, 726 0306
Fax: +62 21 7220 669
E-mail: info@polri.go.id

4. Irjen Pol. Drs.PututEkoBayuseno
Chief of Jakarta Metropolitan Police
Jl. Jend.SudirmanKav. 55
Jakarta Selatan 12190
INDONESIA
Tel: +62 21 5234 173, 523 4001
Fax: +62 21 570 9250
E-mail: bidhumas@metro.polri.go.id, humas.pmj@gmail.com

5. AKBP IsnainiUjianto
Chief of Bekasi District Police
Jl. Ki HajarDewantara No. 1
INDONESIA
Tel: +62 21 884 1110, 8911 4933
E-mail: polreskotabekasikota@metro.polri.go.id

6. Ms.SitiNurLaila
Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission
Jl. Latuharhary No.4-B
Jakarta 10310
INDONESIA
Tel: +62 21 392 5227-30
Fax: +62 21 392 5227
Email: info@komnas.go.id

South Sulawesi: Molotov cocktail attack on Protestant church, fear among Christians

The TorajaMamassa attacked in Makassar, the provincial capital. Three unidentified persons hurled crude bombs against the front of the building, which suffered minor damage, no one has so far claimed responsibility. The authorities have tightened security levels in the area.

AsiaNews (11.02.2013) - A group of unknown assailants attacked the Protestant Church TorajaMamassa in Makassar, the capital of the Indonesian province of South Sulawesi

with Molotov cocktails. The episode took place at 4 this morning and so far, nothing is known of the authors of the act and there are no official claims. In an attempt to set it on fire, the unknown assailants caused minor damage to the building. Investigators are focusing on Islamic extremist factions in the area, but there is no physical evidence so far.

Local authorities have tightened controls and the level of security around the Christian place of worship and throughout the area. Local witnesses reported that, in the night, three unidentified people hurled Molotov cocktails at the building, then they hastily abandoned the scene of the crime. The act has caused minor damage to the walls of the structure.

The area of Makassar has long enjoyed peace and tranquility, without serious incidents linked to Islamic fundamentalism or religious tensions. However, towards the end of last year the situation changed so much that the authorities had to raise the alert level. In November, an Islamic extremist faction targeted the governor of South Sulawesi SahrulYasrilLimpo, targeting him with a rudimentary bomb during a sporting event. In early January 2013 two members of a Muslim extremist group engaged in a shootout with police inside a mosque. The battle ended with the death of two terrorists.

From 1997 to 2001 the island of Sulawesi and the nearby Moluccas were the scene of a bloody Muslim-Christian conflict. Thousands of victims and houses were razed to the ground, hundreds of churches and mosques destroyed, and almost half a million people made refugees, of which 25 thousand in Poso alone. On 20 December 2001 a truce was signed between the two sides in Malino, South Sulawesi, through a peace plan promoted by the government. However, the truce has not stopped sporadic episodes of terror against innocent victims. Among the various cases the beheading of three girls on their way to school, at the hands of Islamic extremists in October 2005 (see [.AsiaNews 29/10/2005 Indonesia: three Christian schoolgirls beheaded](#)) raised global indignation.

Indonesia must end religious discrimination: Amnesty International

Islam Times (27.01.2013) - Amnesty International has called on Indonesia to end discrimination against religious minorities in the country and guarantee the safe return of Shia Muslims to their homes.

"The Indonesian authorities must guarantee the safe, voluntary and dignified return of the Shia community to their homes, according to their wishes," said Isabelle Arradon of Amnesty International's Asia Pacific program in a recent report.

She added that Jakarta should also help the community to "rebuild the homes that were damaged or destroyed."

In August 2012, Shia Muslims from KarangGayam village in the Sampang district were displaced after an anti-Shia mob of around 500 people attacked the community with weapons and stones, killing two of them.

The mob set fire to 35 houses belonging to the Shia Muslims.

Since then, the displaced Shia Muslims have been living in inadequate conditions at a sports complex in the district on Madura Island, off Indonesia's eastern coast of Java.

The Indonesian government also cut the free food and water supplies for the Shias in November, while religious and village leaders demanded the group convert to Sunni Islam, which is the religion of the majority in Indonesia, or be expelled from the district.

Arradon further said, "They (officials) must also end discrimination against religious minorities in the country and investigate reports that the local and provincial authorities are coercing Shia followers to renounce their faith before they are allowed to return to their homes."

"Those involved in the attack on the Shia community in August must also be brought to justice in proceedings which meet international standards of fairness," she added. During its Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2012, Indonesia reaffirmed its commitment to freedom of religion and to address cases of religious intolerance.

However, religious minorities in the country continue to face harassment and those who commit acts of violence against them are rarely brought to justice.

East Java: six Catholic schools could be shut down for not teaching Islam

Asia News (16.01.2013) - Municipal authorities in Blitar, a town in East Java province, are threatening to shut down six Catholic schools "by 19 January" if the latter do not provide Islamic courses and readings of the Qur'an to their Muslim students, in accordance with regional bylaw n. 8 of 2012, which requires all Muslim students to receive Islamic courses in school. The latter is based on a national law, the National Education Act n. 55 of 2007.

The six Catholic schools at risk are the Diponegoro Catholic High School, the Catholic Vocational Training High School, Saint Mary KG, Saint Mary Elementary School, and YosSudarso Catholic Elementary and YosSudarso Catholic Junior High School.

The schools received the municipal injunction in the final days of 2012, but their administrators have refused to comply with the directive by 19 January, this according to the head of the local department of the Religious Affairs Ministry.

So far, school administrators have not released any official statement on the matter because of the sensitive nature of the issue. Before expressing any opinion, they are set to take part in meetings with Catholic leaders.

Sources within the schools note however that Muslim students and their families had accepted their teaching programmes "without complaining." No one has ever "objected on religious grounds".

In fact, it has been a long established practice that Indonesia's private Christian schools, including those run by the Catholic Church, are not required to offer courses on Islam or readings of the Qur'an as in public schools. Instead, they provide courses and seminars on Christianity and catechism.

Muslim students who attend these schools can for their part take courses on Islam sponsored by their respective Muslim group.

Indonesia envisions more religion in schools

New York Times (06.01.2013) - AnnisaNurulJannah, 11, was learning about how devices transmit heat, sound and electricity. "I like science because it teaches me a lot," the sixth grader at Petamburan 04, a school in a working-class part of Jakarta, said about her favorite subject. "I'd be sad if it was removed from school."

Millions of children in Indonesian elementary schools may no longer have separate science classes starting in June, the beginning of their next school year, if the government approves a curriculum overhaul that would merge science and social studies with other classes so more time can be devoted to religious education.

A draft of the proposal was posted online in November and December for public comment. The government is analyzing the feedback and will meet with a team of experts shortly to develop new lesson plans.

Ibnu Hamid, an Education Ministry spokesman, said feedback showed that people generally agreed with the curriculum changes but were worried that there would not be enough time to train teachers and prepare new books. The comments have not been released to the public, however, and some critics question whether they truly reflect broader opinion.

Officials who back the changes say that more religious instruction is needed because a lack of moral development has led to an increase in violence and vandalism among youths, and that could fuel social unrest and corruption in the future.

"Right now many students don't have character, tolerance for others, empathy for others," MusliarKasim, the deputy minister of education, said in an interview in November. He proposed the changes in September.

He is part of a team of officials, academics and advisers from the office of Vice President Boediono working to streamline the curriculum in 2013.

Mr. Hamid said that the aim was to create a "balance between attitude, skills and knowledge."

The draft curriculum released to the public in November was light on details. It did not outline how science and social studies would be taught once their dedicated classes were eliminated, or describe how religion and civics would contribute to character building.

[Indonesia](#) is a Muslim-majority country with a secular government that recognizes the rights of six different faiths, including Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

Religion is taught to students according to their own faiths, meaning that Muslim students are instructed in Islam, while Christian students study Christianity in separate classes. Reflecting the country's demographics, most religious instruction is Islamic.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs, which advises the Education Ministry, is proposing that religious education be increased to four hours a week from two. It will remain a

compulsory subject, along with mathematics, arts and crafts, physical education, Indonesian language and civics.

Just days after the ministry went public with the draft, parents, civil society organizations and members of the teachers' federation began an online petition calling the changes unfounded.

"Instead of improving the curriculum, these changes dismantle the existing curriculum and do not guarantee better education in Indonesia," states the petition, which has received more than 780 signatures.

The proposal to eliminate dedicated science and social studies classes has led to an outcry among parents and educators who worry that it could lead to a dumbing down of the country and make it less competitive.

Indonesia, a vast archipelago with more than 240 million people, has one of Asia's fastest growing economies. Its attempt to improve its manufacturing and service industries is tied to its efforts to produce more skilled workers. Officials in the trade and manpower ministries have urged more training in areas like computer science.

Critics say the proposed changes will take the country in the opposite direction.

"We're going to have a lost generation," said SrisetiowatiSeiful, executive director of the Surya Institute, a private foundation that develops alternative math and science teaching materials. "It's going to mean fewer researchers, less technology development. It's Indonesia entering the Dark Ages."

Teachers at Annisa's school in Petamburan say science and social studies are practical classes that teach children to ask questions, identify problems and find solutions. They would be difficult to integrate into other instruction.

"Children learn to understand new things through science," said Edi Kusyanto, principal of Petamburan 04. "It stimulates their spirit to learn, their curiosity."

One criticism of the proposed changes is that they overlook more crucial reforms needed in the education system.

"Our government is being reactive," said ItjeChodidjah, an education expert who has advised the government on previous curriculum changes. "They think the solution to violence is more religious education, when there are a lot of causes and one of them is problems in the schools themselves."

In much of rural Indonesia, teachers often fail to turn up to school, local administrations do little to monitor the quality of instruction, and books are dated or inadequate. Education experts say that many teachers lack basic knowledge about the current curriculum and are ignorant of the fact that they are allowed to develop their own course plans. Even in cities like Jakarta, schools in poor neighborhoods like Annisa's lack resources and well-trained teachers.

Teachers need to be better trained on how to implement the current curriculum and teach religion in a way that is not dogmatic, said Ms. Chodidjah. She added that officials had little understanding of the conditions in most schools and failed to recognize that low teaching quality had made Indonesia a global laggard. A report released in November by Pearson and the Economist Intelligence Unit, which ranked national education systems, placed Indonesia at the bottom of its list of 40 countries.

But officials who back the proposal say that the government has a responsibility to prepare children to be better citizens, which means providing them with their moral and religious instruction.

Over the past year, analysts have noted a rise in religiously motivated violence, with recent clashes between hardline Islamists and minority religious groups including Christians, Shiites and the Muslim sect Ahmadiyah. A recent survey by the Setara Institute, a human rights group, recorded 371 acts of religious violence in 2012, marking a 25 percent increase from the previous year.

Some officials blame such incidents on a lack of character development in schools.

"You can see that we are getting more intolerant," said Bambang Widianto, a member of the advisory team from the vice president's office. "Students cannot accept that there are people that have different religions and come from different backgrounds. It's scary, actually."

Kamaruddin Amin, secretary of the directorate general of Islamic education at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, said religious values could prevent misbehavior.

"Right now religion doesn't contribute significantly to building character because the time allotted to religious education is very limited," he said.

He brushed off concerns that more religious instruction would have a negative impact on the education system.

"Indonesians are religious people, they are very much attached to their religious teachings, their religious values," he said. "That is why religion must be taught in school."

Some lawmakers on the House of Representatives commission overseeing education and youth affairs agree that prayer and worship should be promoted in school.

But critics of the proposal do not think that a curriculum overhaul is the answer. Some teachers worry that government and religious leaders are oversimplifying the problem and are using terms like "character building" and "morality" to justify more religious education.

Indonesia has set aside 171 billion Indonesian rupiah, or almost \$18 million, to draft a new curriculum, but many worry that the money will be wasted if attention is not put toward improving the education system as a whole.

"To change the curriculum, you have to train the teachers, you have to provide the books," said Lestia Primayanti, who teaches first grade at Kembang Elementary School in Jakarta. "Indonesia is a very big country. Change is not as easy as flipping your hand."