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Massive mob in Indonesia protests Christmas eve service

Church meeting in tent has sought building permit for years

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (24.12.2009) / HRWF (25.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - More than 1,000 people protested the Christmas Eve service of a church meeting in a makeshift facility in Bekasi, West Java.

Christians of the Filadelfia Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Church (HKBP) fearfully held their service, including the Lord's Supper, in spite of the disturbance.

With the Dec. 24 service scheduled to start at 9 p.m., the mob had already gathered at 6 p.m., shouting demands that it not take place and that the church be disbanded because it did not have permits. The church erected a tent and a semi-permanent structure for the service.

The church does not yet have a permanent building, though the congregation has been trying to obtain permission for one for years, church leaders said. The protestors claimed that the Christmas service could not be held at the site because a church building permit had not been issued.

Hundreds of police and soldiers were on hand to guard the 200 worshippers against the protestors. The service continued until the end, with police accompanying worshippers as they left. Other police and soldiers guarded the property after the mob had dispersed.

The Rev. Palti Panjaitan said that the crowd blocked the street in front of the site in an area of up to 200 meters.

"They blocked vehicles and people trying to get to the church," the pastor said. "However, after negotiations, our congregation was able to pass, and the service was held on time."

Bekasi Police Chief Herri Wibowo said that the church had not obtained citizens' approval or recommendations from either the local government or the Bekasi office of the Department of Religion.

"The mob in the street rejects the building of a church and holding of worship services because permits have not been granted," Herri said.

The church lot is located in the Ninth ward of Jejalan village in Bekasi district. A captain of the Ninth ward who goes by the single name of Bongkon said that the church permit application has been in process for at least two years.

"Some of the citizens have signed the letter agreeing to the church, but some have not agreed," said Bongkon. "The church claims that they have permission and will only use the place temporarily."

Church elder Tigor Tampubolon said that the church purchased the land with the intention of constructing a worship building from the beginning. He said the seller of the land and the village leader agreed to construction of a church building, but that sub-district level officials have created delays.

Thus far Filadelfia HKBP Church has held services in the tent. Tampubolon said he hopes that local residents will not bother the congregation's future worship.

"Every citizen has the right to worship in his own way," he said. "There is no need to request permission from the block or ward captains, or from the government."

Pastor Panjaitan said that the church has submitted all the necessary papers for a construction permit for a permanent building, but that formal permission has not yet been issued.

"The church building will go up as soon as the permit is issued," he told Compass.

On Dec. 27 another demonstration took place during Sunday worship, with a mob gathering and demanding that services cease. This crowd, however, was not as big as the one that tried to stop the Christmas Eve service.

The Filadelfia congregation has been active since 2000, with services initially held in the pastor's home. In 2006, a mob of 300 people swarmed the pastor's home during a Sunday morning service. Claiming to be neighbors, they pressured the pastor to sign a document promising not to hold religious meetings at his home.

Since then, services have been held in the homes of various church members on a rotating basis.

In 2008 there was another threat to close the church. The captain from the Fourth block of the 10th ward sent the church a letter and personally visited the pastor with a community request to stop worship services.

Two Indonesian churches receive bomb threats

Islamic groups demand halt to threatened congregation's worship

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (13.10.2009) / HRWF (14.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two churches in the greater Jakarta area have received bomb threats.

In East Jakarta, the pastor of a Batak Protestant Christian Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, or HKBP) on Bogor Street received a threatening phone call before Sunday services on Oct. 4. The church building is located near the headquarters of an elite police corps.

The unknown caller to the Rev. Abidan Simanungkalit's cell phone said the bomb would explode during the morning worship service, the pastor told Compass.

"I was startled to receive the short message," he said. "I immediately phoned some church leaders and then called police."

Scores of police and bomb squad officers came to the site and combed the area for a bomb, discovering a black package in a garbage container near the front of the church building. It contained four large batteries, a small wall clock and a tin can, and after a two hours police determined that it was not a bomb.

Officers speculated that the caller was unable to construct a real bomb but wanted to publicize a threat.

Pastor Simanungkalit said congregation members were alarmed over the threat and that the morning worship was uneasy.

"They were panicky and fearful," he said. "People kept getting up to go outside and check on things."

The church has never had problems with anyone that would lead to such a threat, the pastor added.

"Everything has been peaceful," he said. "The close proximity of the police headquarters seemed to guarantee peace."

Closure Sought

In north Bekasi in the Jakarta metropolitan area, a church leader of a Bethel Indonesia congregation received a similar threat the previous day, Oct. 3.

Jeffry Lalamentik said he received the threat on his cell phone, with the unknown caller also saying, "Your church will be bombed during morning worship."

Upon receiving the threat, Lalamentik said, he contacted the Rev. Daniel Susanto, who quickly called police. A bomb squad arrived shortly after and made a thorough search, but they did not discover any explosive device.

Lalamentik said there was reason to take the threat seriously. In July a number of radical Islamic groups, including the Islamic Defenders' Front (Front Pembela Islam), Iqra Echo and the Forum for Communication and Hospitality of the Musala Mosque (FKSMM) in Bekasi demanded that the church close.

The church meets in a private home in the midst of a housing complex.

"We are putting up a permanent church building," Lalamentik said. "Until that is finished, we are worshipping at Pastor Daniel's home."

Pastor Susanto said the church had secured permission for the church building from Bekasi officials in April. The Muslim organizations, he said, have opposed the church meetings at his house, where worship has taken place since 2000.

"We normally worship at my home but occasionally move to other houses," the pastor told Compass.

A crowd of 600 protestors from Islamic organizations have demonstrated in front of Bekasi government offices demanding a halt to the Bethel Indonesia church's worship services, he added, and they are also fighting the establishment of the congregation's building.

Budi Santosa of the FKSMM said that the required papers for the building permit were incomplete because the recommendation from the local Interfaith Communications Forum was missing.

The Muslim groups have met with the deputy mayor of Bekasi, Mochtar Mohammad, and the assistant leader of the Bekasi City Council, Ahmad Syiakhu, as well as several other officials. Santosa said the officials are studying the Islamic organizations' objections to both the house church worship and its building but have taken no action.

Islamic groups shut down worship of Church in Indonesia

Under pressure from Islamists, local officials order halt to services in home

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (05.10.2009) / HRWF (06.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Several Islamic organizations have pressed officials in a sub-district near Indonesia's capital city to forbid Jakarta Christian Baptist Church to worship in a house, resulting in an order to cease worship.

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the Betawi Forum Group, and political party Hizbut Tahrir have told officials in Sepatan sub-district, Tangerang district, near Jakarta that worship activities cannot be conducted in a residence. The house belongs to the Rev. Bedali Hulu.

Both District Officer Ismet Iskandar and a sub-district officer support the closure and have ordered Hulu to use his home only as a residence, the pastor said. The sub-district officer, who goes by the single name of Rusdy, has sent a notice ordering an end to all worship at the house.

"But they have not put forth a solution," Hulu said. "For a long time we have suggested that we build a place of worship, but there has been no response from the local government."

On Sept. 27 a large crowd came to the house and demanded a stop to the Sunday worship service, Hulu said. Visibly frightened and anxious, the congregation hurried through the service.

An Islamic throng also came to the house on Sept. 13, with hundreds barging in and forcing the congregation out, Hulu said. Worship did not take place that day.

In another incident on the night of Sept. 19, unknown persons burned a vehicle belonging to the church. Hulu said the car was parked in front of his house. The next day Hulu reported the incident to police, who promised to catch the culprit, though at press time no one had been arrested.

Security forces, however, were able to maintain peace the next day when a mob showed up at the house, Hulu said; worship took place free of incident.

Church members feel terrorized by the mobs, the pastor said, but the nearest house of worship is several miles away, and many congregants do not have access to transportation. The Sepatan church has been serving worshippers, mostly day laborers, in Pisangan village since 2005.

"In the beginning we approached religious and community leaders and asked for permission to worship," Hulu said. "They had no objections."

Hulu established the church in June 2005 and held services in his home until December 2006 without objection from neighbors. He had obtained written permission from a local official to hold the services, and the church was registered with Religious Affairs authorities.

When the church planned to hold a Christmas celebration in December 2006, however, FPI members began an extended intimidation campaign with the express goal of ending "illegal" Christian activity in the village.

A Joint Ministerial Decree promulgated in 1969 and revised in 2006 requires a congregation of at least 90 adult members, the permission of at least 60 neighbors and a permit from local authorities to establish a place of worship. Church leaders say it is virtually impossible to obtain a permit under these terms.

The Rev. Wilhelmus Latumahina, head of the Fellowship of Pentecostal Churches of Banten Province, said that for years different groups have requested permission to build places of worship in Sepatan sub-district, with no response from officials.

He added that if the government closes a church, it is obligated to provide a solution.

Hulu said he would like to negotiate a solution. The pastor said he has tried repeatedly to meet with Sub-district Officer Rusdy but has been told that the official was not in the office.

Outside Agitators

Hulu said outside Islamists have incited local people to oppose the church.

Two years ago Islamists succeeded in closing the church, and Hulu was temporarily forced from the area. On Nov. 4, 2007, as children attended Sunday school at the church, a group of around 10 FPI members arrived and broke up the meeting. On Nov. 19 of that year, several FPI associates sent a letter to Hulu warning him and his family to leave the village within six days or the extremists would chase them out.

Hulu left temporarily on the advice of police, but his wife and mother-in-law were allowed to remain.

When Hulu filed another police report, the police summoned him to a meeting at the home of FPI leader Habib Muhammad Assegaf. While Hulu and his wife met with Assegaf,

a church member sent a text message informing them that a small mob had attacked the church, breaking windows and taking church property. The mob also forced Hulu's mother-in-law to leave the building.

Hulu reported this incident to district police in Tangerang, who informed him that he could either return to Pisangan village and cease all religious activity, or pursue the matter through legal channels. Weary of the constant pressure, Hulu filed an official complaint.

A Pisangan FPI leader who goes by the single name of Ocit then demanded that Hulu withdraw his complaint or else FPI members would raid the homes of individual church members.

Tensions were subsequently resolved through dialogue facilitated by a member of the Tangerang Parliament, Hanie Lawrence, and worship was permitted to resume. A number of radical Muslim organizations, however, have now resumed the fight to close the church.

Agus Andrianto, police chief of Tangerang district, said his forces are doing everything possible to maintain peace in Sepatan.

"It is our job to curb excesses," he said. "We don't want anything to get out of hand."

Church in Indonesia wins legal battle to worship in building

Court in West Java rescinds mayor's order revoking permit

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (29.09.2009) / HRWF (30.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Christians have won a court battle restoring the right to worship in their building in Depok City, West Java.

Depok Mayor Nur Mahmudi Ismail on March 27 had revoked the building permit for a multipurpose building and house of worship for Gereja Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) church following protests by Muslims. A court in Bandung on Sept. 17 rescinded the order that revoked the church building permit, paving the way for congregants to resume worship there.

Head Judge A. Syaifullah read the decision of the three-judge panel, which found the mayor's reasoning for canceling the building permit inadequate. The mayor had said that most people living near the church objected to its building in Jalan Pesanggrahan IV, Cinere Area of Depok City.

"These objections by the local residents should have been raised when the building permit was going through the approval process, not protesting afterwards," said Syaifullah.

Syaifullah added that the mayor also should have taken the views of church members into consideration.

"In this case, the revocation of the building permit was based upon the objections of one group in the community without considering those from the church," he said.

Construction of the church building had begun in 1998, shortly after the permit was issued, but halted soon afterward due to a lack of funds. When the project began anew in 2007, members of a Muslim group from the Cinere Area of Depok City and neighboring villages damaged the boundary hedge and posted protest banners on the walls of the building. Most of the protestors were not local residents.

The court determined that lawyers for the church successfully demonstrated that church leaders had followed all Depok City procedures for the building permit. Betty Sitompul, vice-chair of the HKBP church building committee, stated that the church court win was a victory for all Christians.

"We won because we had followed all the procedures and had completed all the required documents," she said.

In early June the church had filed suit against the mayor's action in a provincial court in Bandung, with church lawyer Junimart Girsang arguing that the mayor's revocation of the permit was wrong.

Girsang said that the court had finally sided with justice for all Indonesians.

"The judges made the right decision and had no choice, because all of the papers for the permit were done properly," he said.

The church had been meeting in a naval facility located about five kilometers (nearly three miles) from the church building since the permit was revoked, causing great inconvenience for church members, many of whom did not have their own transportation.

In South Sumatra Province, another HKBP church outside the provincial capital city of Palembang is trying to overcome objections by Muslim protestors in order to complete construction of its building in Plaju.

Church leaders acknowledge they had not finished the application process for a permit before beginning construction. They said they went forward because after they applied to the mayor of Palembang, he told them to talk with the governor of South Sumatra. After talking with Gov. Alex Noerdin and securing his approval on Feb. 10, church leaders began construction on a donated plot of 1,500 square meters only to face a demonstration by members of several Muslim organizations on June 27.

The South Sumatra Muslim Forum (FUI Sumsel) organized the demonstration. Carrying a copy of a mayoral decree dated May 2009 ordering a halt to construction, the protestors gathered outside the building site, listened to speeches and then destroyed a bridge leading to it before demanding that the government ban the building project.

Applications for church permits are often fraught with difficulty in Indonesia, leaving many congregations no choice but to worship in private homes, hotels or rented conference facilities. Such gatherings leave churches open to threats and intimidation from activist groups such as the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front), in recent years responsible for the closure of many unregistered churches.

Muslims order halt to church building in Indonesia

Conflict in South Sumatra Province illustrates difficulty in obtaining building permits

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (15.07.2009) / HRWF (16.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Members of several Muslim organizations joined a demonstration on June 27 to protest construction of a Huria Kristen Batak Protestant (HKBP) church building in Plaju, outside of Palembang, capital of South Sumatra Province.

The South Sumatra Muslim Forum (FUI Sumsel) organized the demonstration. Carrying a copy of a mayoral decree dated May 2009 ordering a halt to construction, the protestors gathered outside the building site, listened to speeches and then destroyed a bridge leading to it before demanding that the government ban the building project.

A spokesman from FUI Sumsel who goes by the single name of Umar, said the group objected on grounds that the church had not secured permission from the local Interfaith Harmony Forum nor a building permit; both are required by a Joint Ministerial Decree regulating the establishment of places of worship.

Umar claimed there were few Christians in the area and questioned the need for a church building.

The chairman of South Sumatra's Interfaith Harmony Forum, who goes by the single name of Syairozi, confirmed that his group had not given permission for HKBP to construct a church building in the area and said such permission was necessary before a building permit could be issued.

The deputy mayor of Palembang, Haji Rom Hertan, issued the May decree ordering a halt to construction because of incomplete documentation.

Confronting bureaucracy

Church members had originally planned to hold a worship service and lay the cornerstone of their new building on June 7.

HKBP Plaju, which first met in 1961, currently worships along with two other congregations in a building owned by the government oil company Pertamina. Several years ago HKBP purchased a 1,370-square meter plot in Palembang, but due to local opposition they were unable to obtain a building permit.

In January, church member Hadi Suroyo donated another 1,500-square meter plot of land to the church, and the congregation drew up plans for a building. A building committee chaired by Saut Tumpal Marpaung then applied to the mayor of Palembang for permission to build a house of worship, but the mayor asked them to approach the governor of South Sumatra.

On Feb. 10 a delegation of church leaders led by the Rev. Japati Napitupulu met with Gov. Alex Noerdin, who said he had no objection to the building of the church.

Napitupulu, responding to criticism that the church pressed ahead with building plans before the application process was complete, said he felt the governor had granted permission in principle. He acknowledged, however, that the church had not "finished working through the permit process at the local level."

As HKBP Plaju and other congregations have learned through bitter experience, applications for church permits are often fraught with difficulty in Indonesia, leaving many congregations no choice but to worship in private homes, hotels or rented conference facilities.

Such gatherings leave churches open to threats and intimidation from activist groups such as the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front), in recent years responsible for the closure of many unregistered churches.

Church, bible students fight discrimination in Indonesia

Village church goes to court over loss of permit; SETIA students demonstrate for new campus

Compass Direct (07.07.2009) / HRWF (08.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Christians have stood up for their rights in two key cases the last few weeks in heavily Muslim Indonesia.

Members of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Church (HKBP) in Cinere village, Depok, West Java appeared in court on June 29 to contest the mayor's revocation of their building permit in March, while students of the shuttered Arastamar School of Theology (SETIA) demonstrated in Jakarta on June 15, asking officials to honor promises to provide them with a new campus.

HKBP church leaders filed suit against the decision in the state court in Bandung, West Java. Two court sessions have been held so far, on June 2 and June 29, with Depok Mayor Nur Mahmudi Ismail represented by Syafrizal, the head of the Depok legal department and who goes by the single name, and political associate Jhon Sinton Nainggolan.

Mahmudi issued a decree on March 27 cancelling a building permit that was initially granted to the HKBP church in Cinere on June 13, 1998, allowing it to establish a place of worship.

The mayor said he had acted in response to complaints from residents. Contrary to Indonesian law, however, Mahmudi did not consult the church before revoking the permit.

Nainggolan, arguing for Mahmudi, claimed the revocation was legal because it was based on a request from local citizens and would encourage religious harmony in Cinere. But Betty Sitompul, manager of the building project, strongly disputed this claim.

"Our immediate neighbors have no objection," she told Compass. "A small minority who don't think this way have influenced people from outside the immediate neighborhood to make this complaint."

Sitompul added that the church had been meeting in a naval facility located about five kilometers (nearly three miles) from the church building since the permit was revoked, causing great inconvenience for church members, many of whom did not have their own transportation.

According to Kasno, who heads the People's Coalition for National Unity in Depok and is known only by a single name, the mayor had clearly violated procedures set forth in a Joint Ministerial Decree, issued in 1969 and revised in 2006, regulating places of worship.

Legal advocate Junimart Girsang, representing the church, confirmed that under the revised decree, conflicts must not be solved unilaterally but through consultation and consensus with the parties involved. He also said it was against normal practice to revoke a building permit.

Construction of the church building began in 1998, shortly after the permit was issued, but halted soon afterward due to a lack of funds. When the project recommenced in 2007, members of a Muslim group from Cinere and neighboring villages damaged the boundary hedge and posted protest banners on the walls of the building. Most of the protestors were not local residents, Sitompul said.

By that stage the building was almost completed and church members were using it for worship services. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Mayor Revokes Church Permit," May 5.)

SETIA Protest

In Jakarta, hundreds of SETIA students demonstrated in front of the presidential palace on June 15, calling on officials to honor promises made in March to provide them with a new campus. (See www.compassdirect.org, "New Building Site Found for Bible College," May 11.)

At least 1,400 staff and students remain in three separate locations in sub-standard facilities, causing great disruption to their studies, according to the students. The original campus in Kampung Pulo, East Jakarta, closed after neighbors attacked students with machetes in July 2008 and remains cordoned off by police.

In negotiations with SETIA director Matheus Mangentang in May, Jakarta officials again promised to assist the school in finding a new site, and promised to work with neighbors to secure approval for a building permit.

Joko Prabowo, the school's general secretary, said he believes officials have now reneged on these promises. When school officials recently requested relocation to Cipayung, East Jakarta, the governor's office rejected their proposal, citing community resistance.

Deputy Gov. Prijanto, who has only a single name, had initially suggested Cikarang in West Java as a new location, but SETIA staff rejected this offer, saying the site was outside Jakarta provincial limits and a move would be prohibitively expensive.

Religious leaders regret police arrests of `defiant' sect figures

By Yemris Fointuna

The Jakarta Post (06.06.2009) / HRWF (07.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Leaders of the Timor Evangelical Church (GMIT) expressed disappointment over the arrests of alleged defiant Sion City of Allah sect leaders as suspects of religious blasphemy, regretting the police for not involving the church's experts in the legal process.

GMIT synod's secretary Robert Litelnoni said the police should have involved the church, the biggest Protestant one in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), before naming the seven leaders of the sect as suspects.

"The police was too rushed to name suspects," Robert said in Kupang on Friday.

Police have named seven figures of the alleged defiant Christian sect, including its leader Nimrot Lasbaun, as suspects in the case.

According to Robert, if the charge was religious blasphemy, then it must be clear which religion had been blasphemed.

"If it is the Protestant Christian that is blasphemed, then who has reported them to the police for arrests," he went on.

"GMIT has never felt of having been blasphemed."

Robert suggested that there was no need for the police to charge the Sion City of Allah leaders with articles on religious blasphemy, arguing that the church had never considered the case as a problem.

He added that GMIT had its own special rules on how to disciple its followers. He said the followers of the sect considered defiant would first have to undergo an internal supervision and would not be directly considered as wrongful.

The same concern was also expressed by GMIT's lawyer John Rihi, who said that it was too premature to use the religious blasphemy article because no expert from the church had been involved to give testimony. "GMIT is very disappointed with the naming of the seven as suspects," John said.

Separately, head of Kupang police's Supervision Affairs First Inps. Dedy Iskandar said his office had conducted the investigation process according to the prevailing laws because the case was seen as having created anxiety in the community.

"We hope the church will not interfere into the case," he said.

Kupang police chief Sr. Comr. Heri Sulistianto previously said that the suspects were detained because the teachings they were preaching were defiant. "They are blaspheming the religion in Indonesia and thus could face five years of imprisonment," Heri said, Thursday.

He said the sect, whose teachings were based on the book of Jeremiah, for example, ban its followers from joining church masses on Sunday.

It also rejected the holy communion conducted by the GMIT and forbid its female followers from wearing underwears while attending prayers. It as well rejected the wedding ceremonies held by the church.

"The leader (Nimrot Lasbaun) even said that his wounded right palm hands would cure themselves by 2011 after marrying to seven women," Heri said.

He added the sect had also given different titles to Nimrot and the six other elites of the sect, each wore a different color of robes. Nimrot, for example, was also given the title as White Horse and wore a white robe.

Kupang Mayor Daniel Adoe separately agreed the sect was defiant and thus he supported the police's probe into the case.

"This is clearly defiant. How can a (Christian) teaching ban people from going to church?" Daniel said, adding that such teaching was not just against the religious teachings but as well the positive laws.

Muslim group in Indonesia threatens newly elected Christian

Sole Catholic to win seat in district legislature told to convert to Islam

Compass Direct (18.05.2009) / HRWF (19.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An Islamic group in West Sumatra province, Indonesia, has issued threats against Dominikus Supriyanto, the only Catholic to win a seat in the district legislature in recent general elections, warning him that he should convert to Islam if he wants to retain the seat.

On April 23, after results were announced, a group identifying itself as the Islamic Forum of West Pasaman attacked Supriyanto's home, slinging stones and breaking several windows. Supriyanto, who was in the house at the time, said the attackers also shouted threats and demanded that he become a Muslim if he planned to stay in politics.

Supriyanto reported the incident to police and requested protection. After a brief investigation, police concluded that the attackers had most likely acted on behalf of unsuccessful election candidates.

Elections took place on April 9, but the election commission has only recently confirmed the names of those who will take up positions at district, provincial and national levels.

Supriyanto stood as a candidate for the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in West Pasaman, West Sumatra, and won a seat in the district legislature from 2009 to 2014. The district is 98 percent Muslim, but Compass sources said voters supported Supriyanto because of his rapport with the Muslim community.

Supriyanto's party supports Pancasila, Indonesia's national policy of tolerance for all religions.

Earlier this year, supporters of other candidates engaged in a so-called "black campaign," warning that Supriyanto would likely "Christianize" West Pasaman if elected.

Despite such accusations prior to and following the elections, Supriyanto is determined to retain his seat.

"I was elected not just by Christians and Catholics, but by Muslims," he told Compass. "I'm going to remain Catholic no matter what happens."

Supriyanto has requested support from fellow party members in Jakarta.

The bishop of Padang diocese, Monsignor Martinus Situmorang, said Supriyanto had won the vote fairly and that if threats continued the diocese would take the issue to a national level.

Members of the Islamic Forum, meanwhile, have pledged to demonstrate publicly against Supriyanto during his inauguration in July.

Indonesian mayor revokes church permit

Christian leaders assert decision breaches religious law

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (05.05.2009) / HRWF (07.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Church members in Depok city, West Java, are unable to use their church building after the mayor, citing protests from area Muslims, revoked a permit issued in 1998.

Under a Joint Ministerial Decree (SKB) issued in 1969 and revised in 2006, all religious groups in Indonesia must apply for permits to establish and operate places of worship.

The Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) church in Cinere village, Limo sub-district, in 1997 applied for permission to construct a church building and auditorium on 5,000 square meters of land, said Betty Sitompul, manager of the building project. Permission was granted in June 1998, and construction began but soon stopped due to a lack of funding.

After construction began again in 2007, members of a Muslim group from Cinere and neighboring villages damaged the boundary hedge and posted banners on the walls of the building protesting its existence. Most of the protestors were not local residents, according to Sitompul.

By then, the church building was almost completed and church members were using it for worship services.

Mayor Nur Mahmudi Ismail asked church leaders to cease construction temporarily to appease the protestors. Six months later, in January 2008, the church building committee wrote to the mayor's office asking for permission to resume work on the project.

"We waited another six months, but had no response," Sitompul said. "So we wrote again in June 2008 but again heard nothing."

The building committee wrote again in February, asking for dialogue with the protestors, but members of the Muslim group also wrote to the mayor on Feb. 19, asking him to cancel the church permit.

On March 27 the mayor responded with an official letter revoking the church permit on the grounds of preserving "interfaith harmony." When challenged, he claimed that city officials had the right to revoke prior decisions, including building permits, at any time.

The Rev. Simon Todingallo, head of the Christian Synod in Depok, said the decision breached SKB regulations and was the result of pressure from a small minority who did not want a church operating in the area. Rev. Todingallo added that the ruling is illegal since the mayor has no right to decide alone, but must also involve Religious Affairs and Internal Affairs ministries.

Saddled with an expensive building complex that was effectively useless, church officials said they would attempt to negotiate with the mayor's office for the return of the permit and seek legal counsel if negotiations failed.

Muslim cult boss held for blasphemy: Jakarta police

Reuters (01.02.2009) / HRWF (06.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Indonesian police were holding the head of a Muslim cult on a

preliminary charge of blasphemy after allegations that the group held rituals involving sex orgies and adultery, a police spokesman said on Sunday.

Agus Imam Solihin, head of the Satria Piningit Weteng Buwono sect, gave himself up to police last week after a raid on the cult's house. A former sect member accused the leader of proclaiming himself God and holding the bizarre sex rituals, Jakarta police spokesman Zulkarnain Adinegara said.

Authorities in Indonesia had been investigating the sect and police said Solihin faces five years jail if found guilty of blasphemy. Police usually classify a person a suspect in Indonesia before prosecutors may lay formal charges.

"If it is proved that Agus Solihin has proclaimed himself God and has restricted sect members from practicing Islam such as through praying it would be blasphemy," Adenegara said.

While Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim country, its constitution protects freedom of religion and it has sizeable Christian, Hindu and Buddhist communities.

A range of sects have also flourished in a country known for its religious tolerance, but some have been clamped down on by authorities, particularly when there has been pressure from a small, but vocal radical Muslim fringe.

(Reporting by Telly Nathalia; Editing by Ed Davies and Louise Ireland)

Religious violence getting worse in Indonesia

By Adianto P. Simamora

The Jakarta Post (14.01.2009) / HRWF (15.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Religious intolerance is getting worse here, with state agencies, radical groups and community organisations involved in violations of freedom of faith and religion, according to a report released Tuesday.

The recent sealing of the synagogue in Surabaya, East Java, by Muslims in a protest against the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip was the latest case of religious intolerance in Indonesia.

The incident was not included in the 2008 Report on the Condition of Religious and Faith Freedom in Indonesia, which was released by the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace.

But Setara Institute chairman Hendaradi said the closure of the Jewish place of worship was against the principle of religious tolerance.

"It is clearly part of religious violence and cannot be tolerated," he told The Jakarta Post after launching the report.

The report found 265 cases of violence against religions from January-December last year, a significant increase from only 135 cases in 2007.

"The increase is spurred by the rising persecution against the Jamaah Ahmadiyah by Islamic organisations to pressure the government to issue a presidential decree banning the minority sect," the report said.

Last year, the government issued a joint ministerial decree forbidding Ahmadiyah from spreading its religious teachings, bowing to pressure from extremist groups that had attacked its followers, their mosques and houses across the country.

Out of the 265 incidents, the institute recorded 367 violations against freedom of religion and faith.

"Of the 367 violations, the state was involved in 188 cases of violence both by 'commission and omission'," Hendaradi said.

The report said police were involved in 121 cases of religious intolerance, regents and mayors in 28 cases while 52 others involved courts and regional legislative councils.

"What is worrying is that more individuals and unidentified groups launched sporadic religious attacks, which reached 91 cases last year," Hendaradi said.

The report blamed the radical Islamic Defender Front (FPI) and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) as the main actors in the religious violence.

"We record the MUI involved in 42 cases and the FPI in 27 cases including in the Monas incident last year," he said, referring the brutal attack on activists during a pro-tolerance rally in the National Monument, Central Jakarta.

The Setara conducted investigations in North Sumatra, South Sumatra, West Sumatra, Jakarta, Banten, West Java, Central Java, Yogyakarta, South Sulawesi, South Kalimantan and West Nusa Tenggara.

West Java was the province recording the highest rate of religious violence with 73 cases, followed by West Sumatra and Jakarta provinces with 56 and 45 cases, respectively.

"Most of the cases took place in June when the government issued a joint ministerial decree to curb the activities of Ahmadiyah," Hendaradi said.

Religious Affairs Minister Maftuh Basyuni claimed a 2006 decree on religious harmony had sharply decreased religious violence in the country. "This is big achievement," he said Tuesday as quoted by Antara.

The 2006 decree requires people to obtain government permits to build houses of worship.

Earlier, the Wahid Institute said religious violence rose to 232 cases in 2008 from 197 in the previous year.
