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Indonesian churches wary of Islamist offer of 'protection'

Following attacks, Islamic Defenders Front's Christmas gesture rings hollow

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct (21.12.2010) / HRWF (22.12.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - In the wake of several attacks on worship services by Indonesia's notorious Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), several Jakarta area church leaders rejected the FPI's offer to help protect them over Christmas.

FPI leader Rizieq Shihab made the offer last week, saying he was working in cooperation with the Indonesian Communion of Churches and the Indonesian Bishops Conference. But several churches publicly rejected the offer, with online forums comparing FPI church protection to "foxes protecting a chicken coop."

Jakarta's police chief on Friday (Dec. 18) promised protection for every "registered" church in the area, The Jakarta Globe reported. Many Indonesian churches are unregistered, however, since they fail to meet the strict conditions of a Joint Ministerial Decree (SKB) governing places of worship.

The Indonesian public has harshly criticized FPI members for their role in multiple church attacks over the past year and faulted police and politicians for failing to intervene.

The most recent attack occurred last Sunday (Dec. 19), when more than 100 Islamists gathered outside the sealed home of the Rev. Badia Hutagalung of Huria Kristan Batak Protestan (HKBP) church in Rancaekek to disrupt worship services, sources said.

Another attack on Sept. 12 led to the arrest and detention of 13 FPI members, including Murhali Barda, leader of the FPI's Bekasi branch. During the attack, assailants stabbed and critically wounded church elder Hasian Sihombing and beat the Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak over the head with a wooden beam. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Indonesian Church Leaders Wounded in Attack," Sept. 15.)

'Christians Should Not Provoke Us'

After making the offer of FPI assistance at the Jakarta police headquarters on Dec. 14, Shihab told The Jakarta Post that "Islam is not allowed to disrupt other religions worship," but he added the warning that "Christians should not provoke us."

His offer came just two days after some 300 Islamists from FPI, the Indonesian Ulama Forum and the Islamic Reformist Movement, together with civil service police officers, raided and forcibly closed seven churches in Rancaekek. (See www.compassdirect.org, 'Islamists Raid House Churches in West Java,' Dec. 17.)

Sub-district head Meman Nurjaman on Nov. 16 had sent out a decree ordering 11 churches in Rancaekek to close, citing protests from the local community. Nurjaman later admitted that he had acted under pressure from Muslim hardliners living outside the housing estate, according to a Compass source, who added that Nurjaman had no legal authority to issue the decree.

During the Dec. 12 raid, Islamists forcibly removed at least 100 worshipers from a residential building used by the HKBP Bethania church and several other churches, and they urged the local government to seal the building immediately because it was not a registered place of worship.

Hutagalung said the congregation only worshipped there because they could not meet the terms of the SKB, which requires proof of at least 90 church members, signatures of approval from at least 60 local residents, and approval from village officials and a local interfaith forum.

The mob also attacked six other house churches in Rancaekek on Dec. 12, forcing five of the seven to close.

A day after the raids, Adj. Sr. Comr. Hendro Pandowo, the Bandung police chief, said Christians in Bandung should refrain from putting themselves in harm's way.

"If they pray in churches, I will protect them if anybody disturbs them," he told The Jakarta Globe. "If they pray in places they are not allowed to, they are breaking rules, so why would I protect them?"

Readers posting comments to the Globe article online said it was almost impossible for congregations to obtain a building permit under existing regulations, leaving them no option but to worship in private homes or empty building sites.

One reader, identified only by the log-in name of Aki-Amani, wrote, "Thank you Chief Hendro for your promise of protection – if we follow your dictates. However, don't be surprised if we are found anywhere, everywhere ... praying as we go about our daily activities at home and in the market place, whether you approve and will protect us or not."

Christmas security

Jakarta police on Friday (Dec. 18) met with leaders representing 1,600 churches in greater Jakarta to discuss security measures for the Christmas season.

Jakarta Police Chief Insp. Gen. Sutarman, identified only by a single name, said at least 9,000 security personnel would be deployed in and around churches in greater Jakarta as part of a total 87,000 security personnel stationed at houses of worship throughout Indonesia over the Christmas and New Year season, the Globe reported.

Police began providing Christmas security for churches after a series of 38 coordinated church bombings on Dec. 24, 2000, left at least 18 people dead and dozens injured across the nation. The bombings were organized by Jemaah Islamiyah, a local Islamic terrorist group.

"The Jakarta police guarantee that celebrations will be conducted peacefully across all churches registered with us in the city," Sutarman reportedly said.

What that implies for unregistered churches remains to be seen.

Spokesmen from two unregistered churches told the Globe they would meet this Christmas despite explicit threats from the FPI to ransack "controversial" Christmas celebrations.

The congregation of HKBP Filadelfia in Bekasi will meet in a tent on the street next to their sealed church, despite the risk of further aggression or physical harm from the FPI, sources said.

Members of Gereja Kristen Indonesia Yasmin in Bogor, however, reportedly said they will break open the seals on their partially-constructed church, closed in September due to pressure from the FPI and other hard-line groups despite having a legal permit.

"We want to celebrate religious freedom in our church," spokesman Bona Sigalingging told reporters, adding that police would not be asked to provide security.

Ahmadiyah now getting targeted in north Jakarta

By Ulma Haryanto & Zaky Pawas

The Jakarta Globe (05.11.2010) / HRWF (09.11.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - After 24 years of peaceful coexistence in a dense neighborhood in North Jakarta, a small Ahmadiyah mosque on Friday faced its first protest by conservative Muslims demanding its closure.

"About 60 people came, claiming to be students from Da'wah Islamiyyah college, one kilometer away from here.

They held a demonstration," Deden Sujana, head of security of the Ahmadiyah community, told the Jakarta Globe on Friday.

But when the protesters arrived at 1:30 p.m., around 60 Ahmadiyah youths had already gathered inside the mosque and scores of police officers were standing by.

There was no violence and the Da'wah Islamiyyah group left about two hours later, after making a number of statements in front of the tightly guarded mosque.

But, they warned they would return if the mosque did not close down.

Police chief of the Tanjung Priok subdistrict Comr. Budhi Herdi Susianto and subdistrict chief Supriyono talked with the protesters and Budhi later said that "the gist was that they want the Ahmadiyah disbanded."

The Ahmadiyah is a small sect that has incurred the wrath of some mainstream Muslims for claiming, against a tenet of Islam, that their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was the last prophet.

The minority sect has been the target of attacks and violence in various towns and cities in West Java and West Nusa Tenggara in the past years.

Ahmadiyah's Deden said the group had already visited last week and demanded that the Nuruddin mosque take down its sign board.

"We obliged because they brought with them the head of the neighborhood and several people claiming to be residents," he continued.

On Thursday night, several people went to the mosque, warning it to close down.

"We could not oblige. Praying is an obligation in every religion. This is the house of God, they can't just close it down," Deden said.

Siti Afiah, 47, a housewife who has been living in the area for three years, said she had never been bothered by the mosque.

"It's their business," she said.

Karno, who has lived in the area for 20 years, realized that some of the locals had become somewhat anxious lately.

"Perhaps it's because people started to see that the congregation was growing and those who came to the mosque were often not from the neighborhood," the 50-year-old said.

He said local people who at first had no problems with the Ahmadiyah community might start to rethink their position now that the issue seems to be heating up.

Anshar, 72, one of the elders who started the Ahmadiyah congregation in the area, said the mosque was the only one for the Ahmadiyah group in North Jakarta, comprising some 200 people.

Bona Tigor Naipospos from the Setara Institute of Peace and Democracy said police and other state institutions will have to step up and stop discrimination of the Ahmadiyah.

He also questioned the reason behind the recent upsurge in protests. "All these times they were quiet. Why [demonstrate] now?"

Church in Indonesia forced to accept worship terms of Islamists

Muslim groups, city officials dictate where church can hold services

By Victor Raqual

Compass Direct (15.10.2010) / HRWF (16.10.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A church in Banten Province that has been in conflict with Muslim groups for more than two years was compelled to cease meeting in the pastor's home last week in a bid to put an end to harassment and threats.

The Sepatan Baptist Christian Church (GKB Sepatan) in Pisangan Jaya village, Sepatan, in Tangerang district, conceded that it would no longer worship in the home of the Rev. Bedali Hulu but rather in the facilities of two other churches.

In exchange, officials agreed to process a temporary worship permit that would presumably remove the pretext for Islamic protests against the church, but they refused to accept a deadline for doing so. Pastor Hulu argued at the Oct. 7 meeting with officials and Islamic groups that local government officials be given a three-month deadline for granting the temporary worship permit, but the officials insisted on a "flexible" time for issuing it.

Tangerang district authorities had issued a decree on Jan. 21 ordering all worship activities to cease at the church. Officials had pressured church leaders to sign a statement that they would stop all worship activities, but they refused.

Pastor Hulu said that he had received the government order on Jan. 26. The church had permission to worship from both local citizens and Christians in accordance with a Joint Ministerial Decree promulgated in 1969 and revised in 2006, he said, but pressure from Islamic groups forced local officials to try to close the church.

Representing Islamic interests in the five-hour long deliberations of Oct. 7 was the Communication Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) of Tangerang City. Local officials included the Sepatan district chief, Sepatan sector police chief, the sub-district military commander of Sepatan, Civil police, and an official from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Tangerang.

Pastor Hulu said he felt forced to accept the terms of the Islamic group and officials.

"Actually, we want the district to facilitate our worship by letting us use the function room of their office," he said. "Also, we hope for the government to grant permission for our worship in accordance with the Joint Decree."

A member of the Tangerang FKUB, Abdul Razak, said the talks resulted in the city and the Tangerang FKUB committing to help the congregation to worship temporarily in the nearest church buildings, which are seven kilometers (more than four miles) away in Kedaung, East Sepatan and belong to the Assemblies of God and the Pentecostal Church in Indonesia.

But those two churches use their buildings from 6 a.m. until noon on Sundays, Pastor Hulu said.

"Our congregation wants to worship between 10 am to 12 noon, because after 12 worship would conflict with family customs that are usually done at that hour," he said.

Because of the incompatibility in worship times, the pastor said, GKB Sepatan appealed to a member of the FKUB Tangerang identified only as Zabir, who only suggested Pastor Hulu adhere to the FKUB consensus.

Although the Muslim groups and city officials were able to dictate where the church should worship in the coming months, they allowed the congregation to worship in one of the church members' homes on Sunday (Oct. 10), as long as it wasn't Pastor Hulu's house, he said.

"Next week, if the local government has not been able to facilitate a place of worship to us, then we will worship from house to house," the pastor said.

The church had worshipped in Pastor Hulu's house since November 2008. Previously worship rotated among various members' homes, reducing the congregation from 90 people to 30, he said, but now the congregation numbers 150.

The church has established good relationships with communities, religious leaders and local government, he said.

"First, we helped victims of the tsunami in Aceh in 2007," Pastor Hulu said. "Second, we provided basic food, rice, blankets to flood victims in the village of Pisangan Jaya. Third, we have helped provide free medical treatment for residents affected by flooding in the village of Pisangan Jaya."

The Oct. 7 agreement is yet to be signed. Razak said that the FKUB would draft an agreement for all parties to sign.

"If these problems can be resolved properly, then this will be a moment in history that the district of Tangerang was able to resolve religious issues, particularly related to the establishment of houses of worship," he said.

The chairman of the Tangerang City FKUB, M. Syuro, said the meetings were necessary to forestall tensions as Tangerang is so close to Jakarta, 20 kilometers (12 miles) east.

Church under attack in Indonesia agrees to change venue

Congregation accepts offer under condition that government build them permanent building

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (29.09.2010) / HRWF (30.09.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A West Java church has agreed to move temporarily to a government-selected site following Islamist harassment that included a Sept. 12 attack on two of its leaders.

The Batak Christian Protestant Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, or HKBP) in Ciketing village, Bekasi, decided in a congregational meeting on Sunday (Sept. 26) to accept a government offer to move worship services to the former Organization and Political Party (OPP) building on the condition that local officials will keep a promise to build a new house of worship for them within two years in the Mustika Sari district.

The Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak, who received hospital treatment after she was struck with a wooden plank by suspected Islamic extremists in the Sept. 12 attack, said that the church was ready to stop struggling.

"We are tired of being intimidated and terrorized," Pastor Simanjuntak said. "We will be able to worship quietly and peacefully."

Church lawyer Saor Siagian said that the church had accepted the temporary move with the understanding that the Bekasi municipal government must fulfill its pledge. The government will build a new church building to replace the structure the church is leaving on a 2,500-square meter lot belonging to PT Timah, the Government Tin Mining Co. in the Mustika Sari area of Bekasi. The lot is zoned for general and social facilities.

The government had suggested two alternative locations: the PT Timah lot and a 1,900-square meter parcel in the Strada Housing area. The congregation and leaders of HKBP Ciketing chose the PT Timah property.

The first HKBP Ciketing worship service in the former OPP Building took place without incident on Sunday, with the Bekasi government providing buses to transport the congregation to the new site. Pastor Simanjuntak said the congregation is thankful for the new temporary site, but it does not accommodate the entire congregation. The 10-meter by 14-meter building accommodates 250 people, but normally 300 attend services, and some had to stand outside, she said.

Dozens of police guarded the location.

Zaki Oetomo, a Bekasi city official, told Compass that the building could be used rent-free for two years, with an extension possible if the church desired. The government has offered to provide the buses to transport the congregation to and from the site every week.

20-Year Wait

The Ciketing church originally met in the Pondok Timur Indah housing development with 10 families in 1990, and therefore has generally been called the HKBP Pondok Timur Indah.

"By 1995 it had grown to 30 families," Manorangi Siahaan, a church member, told Compass.

In those days the worship services were held in different members' homes. Manorangi acknowledged that the house church worship did spark some small protests.

Between 1990 and 2010, the church leaders requested building permits three separate times, in 1995, 2000 and 2010. Not once did the local government respond, church leaders said.

By 2005 the congregation had grown to 150, and church leaders bought a 2,170-square meter lot in Ciketing village, near Bekasi City, to construct a church building. They built a semi-permanent structure, which was later torn down because they lacked a building permit under pressure from an Islamic group claiming to speak for the local citizens. As a result, the congregation went back to worshipping in homes on a rotating basis.

In 2007 the congregation had grown to 300 people. They bought a house in Pondok Timur Indah, in the Mustika Jaya area of Bekasi City, to use for worship. The Bekasi government sealed the house on March 1 under pressure from Islamic groups. On July 2, the government sealed the house a second time because the congregation was continuing to worship there. Then on July 11, the church was forced to move their worship service to a vacant property in Ciketing, which had been readied for a church building. This site was about 3 kilometers from their property in Pondok Timur Indah.

Protests by Islamic groups mounted each Sunday at the Ciketing site, culminating in the attack on Pastor Simanjuntak and elder Hasian Sihombing, who was stabbed in the stomach and heart.

Despite court victories, Church building in Indonesia blocked

Islamists attack, issue threats to halt construction of worship center in West Java

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (22.09.2010) / HRWF (23.09.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A year after a church in West Java won a court battle over whether it could erect a worship building, Islamic extremists have blocked construction through attacks and intimidation tactics, church leaders said.

A mob of 50 Muslim extremists on Sept. 12 attacked construction workers at the Batak Christian Protestant Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, or HKBP) site in Cinere village, near Depok City, in Limo district, eyewitnesses said; the 24 workers, who were on break, fled from the attackers, who chased them brandishing wooden boards studded with nails. Cinere village police arrived to restore order, but the mob left behind seven banners opposing the construction.

Three days later, Islamic groups demonstrated near the construction site on Puri Pesanggarahan IV St., demanding that all Christian activities in the area cease. About 70 Muslims participated in the demonstration, trying to approach the construction site until hundreds of police repelled them. Police have continued guarding the site.

The church won a case in West Java State Administrative Court on Sept. 17, 2009, rescinding a local order that had revoked the church's building permit. The Supreme Court later upheld the Bandung court's ruling, but threats have kept the church from proceeding.

Betty Sitompul, vice-chair of the church building committee, said she has received many intimidating text messages from a group opposed to the construction.

"They demanded that the church construction be halted," she told Compass.

Sitompul added that some of the messages were intensely angry, and that all were aimed at stopping construction.

She said she an official of the Depok municipal government contacted her requesting that construction be delayed two months in order to discuss it with area residents. With a Supreme Court decision backing their case, church leaders declined and continued building.

Sitompul said she never yielded to threat or intimidation because the church construction project has a firm legal basis in the Supreme Court decision.

"There was no need to worry any longer," she said. "I felt the problem was solved. It is normal for some to be dissatisfied."

The Muslim Defenders' Front (Front Pembela Islam, or FPI) reportedly participated in the Sept. 15 demonstration, but the FPI leader for Depok City, Habib Idrus Al Gadhri, denied opposing the area HKBP church.

"The rejection is from the Cinere Islam Solidarity Forum [FSUM] not from the FPI," Al Gadhri told Compass.

He said that the HKBP church in Cinere is not facing opposition from the FPI but from the entire Muslim community.

"If FPI members are involved, I'm not responsible," Al Gadhri said. "My advice is for the entire Muslim community in Cinere to sit down together and not demonstrate."

The church had originally been granted a building permit in 1998. 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 FPI, which in recent years has been responsible for the closure of many unregistered churches.

Congregational concern

Despite having the law on their side, church leaders said many in the congregation are haunted with dread amid outbreaks of Islamic ire at the presence of churches in West Java, such as the Sept. 12 attack on the HKBP church in Ciketing, Bekasi, in which an elder was seriously wounded and a pastor injured.

Peter Tobing, head of the Cinere HKBP church building committee, said that some in the congregation and building committee feared that the outbreaks of Islamic opposition will lead to chaos.

The church is planning to sue the Depok municipality based on the allegation that its actions were illegal and caused deterioration at the site. When Depok Mayor Nur Mahmudi Ismail revoked the building permit for a multipurpose building and house of worship on March 27, 2009, it led to losses for the church as the congregation had to leave it unattended for a year, according to Tobing.

"Because of this, construction began with the clearing of weeds and building materials [such as paint] that had degraded," Tobing said.

Sitompul said the bases for the lawsuit are the court decisions declaring the Depok mayor's revocation of the building permit to be illegal.

"The Depok municipal government must take responsibility for the losses incurred when the building permit was revoked," she said.

The lawsuit will seek compensation for damages incurred over the last two years, she said.

"We are going to submit all the data to the Depok government," Sitompul said. "Then we will file our suit in the Depok Municipal Court."

The church plans to construct its multipurpose building on a 5,000-square meter lot. Construction was halted in the initial stages, with the bottom floor 30 percent completed. The church had spent some 600 million rupiahs (US\$66,000), with total costs projected at 2 billion rupiahs (US\$220,000).

Christians pray in shuttered church in Indonesia

Niniek Karmini (AP, September 19, 2010)

AP (19.09.2010) / HRWF (23.09.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Dozens of Christians held prayers inside their boarded-up church near Indonesia's capital Sunday, saying they had as much right as anyone to worship in the world's most populous Muslim country.

They were surrounded by hundreds of police and unarmed security guards.

Using bullhorns, local officials reminded members of the Batak Christian Protestant Church they were banned from the site following an attack on two church leaders by suspected Islamic hard-liners.

"We just want to carry out our obligations as Christians, but authorities are treating us like terrorists," said Advent Tambunan, a member of the congregation in the industrial city of Bekasi.

"There's no justice for us in this country."

Indonesia, a secular country of 237 million people, has more Muslims than any other in the world. Though the country has a long history of religious tolerance, a small extremist fringe has become more vocal - and violent - in recent years.

Ten people were arrested after last week's attacks, which left one churchgoer hospitalized with a stab wound. Among them was the local leader of the hard-line Islamic Defender's Front, which has led calls for the Christians to leave.

In recent months, the hard-liners have thrown shoes and water bottles at the church members, interrupted sermons with chants of "Infidels!" and dumped piles of feces on the land.

Local officials had seven empty buses on standby outside the Batak Christian's shuttered church Sunday, ready to transport them to an alternate site of worship provided by the government.

But members of the congregation, numbering about 100, refused to budge. After lengthy negotiations, they were allowed to carry out Sunday services, with the agreement that they would talk later this week about ways to help defuse religious tensions in the neighborhood.

Police demolish church house

Local Islamic group spurs destruction that demonstrators try to stop

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (22.07.2010) / HRWF (23.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Public order personnel on Monday (July 19) supported Bogor police officers who demolished a house where a church regularly met in a village in Bogor Regency, West Java.

Clashes broke out with church members and others as police tore down the Narogong Pentecostal Church building in Limusnunggal village, Cileungsi sub-district, and officers

arrested 10 people. The structure was located on the Narogong Highway in Bogor Regency, south of Jakarta.

Those arrested were questioned and released, according to Police Commissioner Zulkarnain Harahap. Some officers and a civilian were reportedly injured.

Dozens of people tried to stop Bogor police from demolishing the building, as rumors of the impending destruction had spread far beyond the area. Church members had been guarding the building since the early morning the day it was to be demolished, but a senior police official told The Jakarta Post that he suspected many of the demonstrators were from outside the area.

Eddy Hidayat, head of Bogor police operations, said officials were forced to destroy the building because it lacked a use permit.

"The permit was for a home, but it was used as a place of worship," Hidayat told Compass.

The building coordinator for the Pentecostal church, Hotlan P. Silaen, said police were not neutral in the dispute but succumbed to the pressure of the Muslim group.

"The clash with citizens could have been avoided if the police had been neutral and not been goaded into a situation that caused bodily harm," Silaen said.

Area residents, including non-Christians, had accepted the presence of the church, said local Block Captain Junaedi Syamsudin. He said local people had no objections to the church and there had never been any problems with its presence.

"It was named a house of worship, and there was no problem," he told Compass, adding that conflicts may have arisen because the church was located in a house rather than in a traditional church building.

The church met without incident until the emergence in 2008 of an opposition group calling itself the Forum of the Muslim Brotherhood of Limusnanggal, Syamsudin said. This group worked persistently to have the church eliminated, and three months ago its members went to Cileungsi offices to object to its presence.

The Islamic group "met with regency officials and had an audience with the regent," Syamsudin said. "In the last meeting with the regent, he promised that his orders would be carried out on July 19."

Deputy Senior Police Commissioner Tomex Kurniawan maintained that the police presence had been positive and kept the conflict from spreading.

"Hundreds of people were blocking the way and prepared to fight when the house of worship was demolished," he said, asserting that officers were able to calm emotions and forestall further violence. "We worked to keep the hundreds from being drawn in to fighting against officials."

Kurniawan said two of his men were injured while trying to maintain peace.

The Rev. Rekson Sitorus said the more than 200 people who attend the church, which has existed since 2006, have lost their place of worship. The nearest venue for worship is far away for the congregation, many of whom work in the Bantar Gebang garbage dump, he said.

The church is in the process of applying for a permit for a church building, he said.

Sitorus said the church will take legal action against those responsible for demolishing the house, including the Bogor administration.

Church closure in Indonesia called unconstitutional at hearing

Representative for HKBP congregation in West Java tells court sealing was illegal

By Victor R. Ambarita

Compass Direct (18.06.2010) / HRWF (21.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In a hearing in its lawsuit against a local government, a representative for a church that Bekasi, West Java officials summarily closed earlier this year told an administrative court that the action was unconstitutional.

The Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) Filadelfia church had filed a lawsuit on March 30 against the local government for its Jan. 12 sealing of the building under construction. Regent H. Sa'adudin on April 12 issued a decree to cease worship and other activities.

At a court hearing on June 2, the coordinator of the litigation team, Thomas Tampubolon, explained that the regent's decree of Dec. 31, 2009 to seal the building conflicted with Indonesia's 1945 constitution. He said the decree violated Article 28 of the constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion.

"It also violates Article 29, which guarantees freedom of worship, and Law No. 39 (1999) concerning human rights," Tampubolon said as he read the suit to an administrative court.

Tampubolon said that the decree also violated 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree No. 9 regarding the role of regional administrators in maintaining harmony between religious groups and in the construction of houses of worship.

Lastly, he said that the regent's decree violated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Indonesia ratified in 2005. The legal team requested that the Bandung Administrative Court issue an injunction staying the decree of the Bekasi regent.

Additionally, the team requested that the regent's order be rescinded and that he be ordered to process the building permit request and to grant permission to construct a house of worship in accordance with current regulations.

Deddy Rohendi, a member of the regency defense team, replied that Tampubolon's claims were false, and he requested that the court dismiss the suit.

"The regent's decree was legal," Rohendi said.

As the judges are considering the HKBP Filadelfia's case, they are expected to travel to the village to interview citizens about the church building.

A member of the legal team who is also a member of the church, Parasan Hutasoit, said that the Filadelfia congregation was very upset with the Department of Religion and the Interfaith Harmony Forum because neither had acted upon the request for permission to build which was submitted on April 2, 2008.

"Our application has not been acted upon, and suddenly our church is sealed without clear reason," he said.

Hutasoit said he regretted that the church had been forced to resort to court action. He added that he hopes the suit will force the government to show more care regarding the problem of places of worship and ensure the rights of groups such as HKBP Filadelfia that have obtained the required signatures of local people.

Harrassed

Prior to the hearing, Muslim opponents harassed the church's Sunday worship, demonstrating against it on May 30, as they have on past occasions.

The group of women and children said they were from the Islamic Communications Forum of Jejalan Raya village. They gathered at 8 a.m. in order to hinder church members from worshipping in the area in front of the sealed building.

The Rev. Palti Panjaitan explained that the demonstration lasted about 15 minutes, ceasing after a community leader from Jejalan Raya village told the demonstrators they were causing a disturbance. Worship for the church is normally from 9 to 11 a.m.

"Only the building committee and the church leaders had come," said Panjaitan.

He recounted that on May 27 the church learned a mob was going to demonstrate the next day and notified police.

"Apparently the demonstrators thought that because Friday was a holiday, we would have services," Panjaitan said. "Actually, we did not have anything."

He wished that the police would be more proactive about demonstrations. "As for the demonstrators, what more do they want? We have been forced to worship under the sky, on newspapers, in front of our sealed, church, and they still demonstrate against us," Palti concluded.

On Jan. 3, a mob unrolled mats and sat in front of the church. "They wanted to keep us from worshipping," Panjaitan said.

Seal Order

The Filadelfia Church was founded in April 2000 by Batak families in four village divisions in the North Bekasi area. They held Sunday worship in different homes on a rotating basis.

Citizens from the Islamic Communications Forum of Jejalan Raya village were disturbed by these house services. After the house services were banned, the congregation searched for a piece of land on which to build.

On June 15, 2007, HKBP Filadelfia was able to purchase land from a woman identified only as Sumiati. The Christians told her that they wished to build a church on the property, and Sumiati and her heirs signed affidavits stating that they agreed to this use. The Bekasi government issued the deed on Sept. 26, 2007.

After the purchase, the church began collecting signatures of local citizens in order to satisfy the requirements of 2006 Joint Ministerial Decrees No. 8 and No. 9 requiring at least 90 Christians and at least 60 non-Christians agreeing to construct a church building.

The church quickly obtained the required signatures, and on April 2, 2008 the head of Jejalan Raya village issued a letter recommending that the congregation be given a building permit. The letter was addressed to the Regent of Bekasi with copies to the Department of Religion, the Interfaith Harmony Forum and the District Officer of Tambun Utara (a sub-district of Bekasi).

Since then, nothing has been done. No building permit has been issued. Since Jan. 12 the Bekasi Regency Government has sealed the temporary building the church had been using. As a result, the congregation has been holding services in front of the building fence in the open air.

Umbrellas protect them from the tropical sun, where temperatures often reach 33 degrees Celsius (92 degrees Fahrenheit), and occasional rainstorms hit.

Indonesia's Aceh province strict muslim women's dress code law against "reveling clothing"

By Fakhrurradzie Gade

Associated Press (27.05.2010) / HRWF (31.05.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Authorities in a devoutly Islamic district of Indonesia's Aceh province have distributed 20,000 long skirts and prohibited shops from selling tight dresses as a regulation banning Muslim women from wearing revealing clothing took effect Thursday.

The long skirts are to be given to Muslim women caught violating the dress code during a two-month campaign to enforce the regulation, said Ramli Mansur, head of West Aceh district.

Islamic police will determine whether a woman's clothing violates the dress code, he said.

During raids Thursday, Islamic police caught 18 women traveling on motorbikes who were wearing traditional headscarves but were also dressed in jeans. Each woman was given a long skirt and her pants were confiscated. They were released from police custody after giving their identities and receiving advice from Islamic preachers.

"I am not wearing sexy outfits, but they caught me like a terrorist only because of my jeans," said Imma, a 40-year-old housewife who uses only one name. She argued that wearing jeans is more comfortable when she travels by motorbike.

Motorbikes are commonly used by both men and women in Indonesia.

"The rule applies only to Muslim residents in West Aceh," Mansur told The Associated Press. "We don't enforce it for non-Muslims, but are asking them to respect us."

He said any shopkeepers caught violating restrictions on selling short skirts and jeans would face a revocation of their business licenses.

No merchants have been seen displaying jeans or tight clothing in stores in West Aceh district in recent weeks.

The regulation is the latest effort to promote strict moral values in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, where most of the roughly 200 million Muslims practice a moderate form of the faith.

It does not set out a specific punishment for violators, but says "moral sanctions" will be imposed by local leaders.

Mansur said women caught violating the ban more than three times could face two weeks in detention.

Rights groups say the regulation violates international treaties and the Indonesian constitution.

Aceh, a semiautonomous region, made news last year when its provincial parliament passed an Islamic, or Shariah, law making adultery punishable by stoning to death. It also has imposed prison sentences and public lashings for homosexuals and pedophiles.

Islamic law is not enforced across the vast island nation. But bans on drinking alcohol, gambling and kissing in public, among other activities, have been enforced by some more conservative local governments in recent years.

Opinion polls show that a majority of Indonesians oppose the restrictions on dress and behavior, which are being pushed by hard-liners in the secular democracy.

Muslims burn Christian center under construction in Indonesia

Throngs fear site would be used as Christian school or church

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (04.05.2010) / HRWF (05.05.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Hundreds of people calling themselves the Muslim Community of the Puncak Route last week burned buildings under construction belonging to a Christian organization in West Java Province.

Believing that a church or school building was being built, the mob set fire to the Penabur Christian Education Foundation's unfinished guest house buildings in Cibeureum village of Cisarua sub-district, Bogor Regency, on April 27. They also burned a watchman's hut and at least two cars belonging to foundation directors.

A leader of the mob who identified himself only as Tabroni told Compass that local residents did not want a Christian worship center or Christian school in the predominantly Muslim area of Cibeureum known as Kongsi.

"We found that there is an effort to Christianize through the construction of a school and a Christian place of worship," Tabroni said. He claimed that the foundation had broken a promise to build only a guest house, not a school and a place of worship.

A foundation spokesperson identified only as Mulyono denied that it was building a school or a place of worship. Mulyono added that the guest house, a term synonymous with "conference center" in Indonesia, will be used for education and training.

"It is not true that we were building a school or a place of worship," Mulyono told Compass.

The spokesperson said the foundation had received building permits in June of 2009. An official identified only as Nuryadi of the Bogor Regency office confirmed that all of permits for a guest house and use of the land had been granted in June 2009.

The mob destroyed buildings being constructed on 2.5 hectares (6.18 acres) of land.

A consultant said the Penabur foundation has been building Icharius Guest House since February and had expected to see it completed in August.

Suspicions

Suspicions that a Christian school and a place of worship were being built started almost immediately, as a worship service accompanied the laying of the cornerstone.

Cisarua District Officer Bambang Usada said this led to misunderstanding.

"We had agreed that a guest house was to be built," he said. "Maybe they thought it was going to be a church."

Bogor Police Chief Tomex Kurniawan agreed, saying local residents were never satisfied with explanations of the buildings' purposes. Penabur officials had explained that there would be no house of worship and that a guest house was being constructed with permission of the Bogor government.

"We had mediation meetings, but the people were never satisfied," Kurniawan said. "We are now digging for more information for our investigation. There have been property losses, and someone is responsible."

Dissatisfaction and the attendant religious intolerance among local residents were evident. The local block captain, who identified himself only as Rahmat, said he never accepted that district and regency officials had granted permission for the building.

"They were not building a guest house, but a place of worship," Rahmat told Compass.

At press time police had no suspects for the attack. They have gathered information from 14 people, including construction workers, and they are guarding the building site against further incidents.

Construction has been suspended, also as a precautionary measure.

"We are waiting for a more conducive atmosphere," Mulyono said.

The Penabur Foundation was founded in 1952 under the name the West Java Chinese Kie Tok Kauw Hwee Education Foundation. On March 21, 1989, the name was changed to the Penabur Christian Education Foundation. It runs approximately 60 schools across Indonesia.

Law banning blasphemy is upheld in Indonesia

By PETER GELLING

NYT (19.04.2010) / HRWF (26.04.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Indonesia's Constitutional Court ruled 8 to 1 Monday that a controversial 45-year-old law banning religious blasphemy was constitutional.

The law allows the attorney general's office to ban religious groups that "distort" or "misrepresent" official faiths and calls for up to five years in prison for anyone found guilty of heresy.

The law also limits the number of officially recognized religions to six: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

In practice, the law is applied primarily to perceived offenses against mainstream Islam; nearly 90 percent of Indonesia's 240 million people are Muslims.

The court's chief justice, Mohammad Mahfud, said the law did not contradict the country's 1945 Constitution or its national ideology, known as Pancasila, which nominally guarantees freedom of religion.

Several fundamentalist Islamic groups, which have gathered during hearings since the court took up the case in November, rallied outside the courthouse again on Monday as 600 riot police officers looked on.

The Islamic Defenders Front, a militant group that has attacked religious pluralism rallies in the past, attacked lawyers seeking to repeal the law during the final hearing last week. The judicial review was first sought by a coalition of human rights groups led by the Wahid Institute, an organization founded by Indonesia's late president, Abdurrahman Wahid, that campaigns for religious pluralism.

"This is a setback for Indonesian democracy," said Uli Parulian Sihombing, a human rights lawyer and part of the team that filed the challenge.

Supporters of the law say it is necessary to prevent conflict among religious groups.

The 1965 decree was cited in 2008 when the government all but banned Ahmadiyah, an Islamic sect that does not believe that Muhammad is the last prophet — a central tenet of Islam.

In 2007, the Indonesian Supreme Court sentenced Abdul Rachman, who claims to be the reincarnation of Muhammad, to three years in prison.

The police also arrested Ahmad Moshaddeq, the leader of an Islamic sect known as Al Qiyada, on charges of blasphemy in 2007, even after he declared that he had realized his teachings were misguided and would return to mainstream Islam.

Official orders halt to beleaguered church in Indonesia

With construction permit in limbo, government also denies congregation's temporary site

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (20.04.2010) / HRWF (22.04.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A local government official in Bekasi, West Java last week forbid all worship of the Filadelfia Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Church (HKBP) in Jejalang village.

Regent Sa'duddin on April 12 ordered a halt to all activities of the church, including worship services that have been held on a strip of roadside land since the government on Jan. 12 summarily sealed the church's building, which was under construction.

Announcing the order at a meeting of government officials with the Rev. Palti Panjaitan, Vice-Regent Darip Mulyana said the reason for the closure of the church's makeshift site was that worship interfered with "community activities," though the site is on a nearly deserted roadside bordering vacant fields.

The regent also suggested that the church join with another HKBP congregation in the Graha Prima housing development, far from the Filadelfia church's site. Pastor Panjaitan said the church objects to this suggestion as it would be impractical, creating time and transportation difficulties.

Mulyana said that Sa'duddin had ruled that the church needs to find a new place to construct its prospective permanent church building because local residents had rejected it – even though the church had secured approval from local residents when it submitted its application for a permit in 2008. The government has never acted on the application, and since then Islamic organizations have organized protests to try to pressure government officials to deny approval.

The church on March 30 filed suit against Sa'duddin for unilaterally closing their church building under construction.

The church's Tigor Tampubolon said the church would never have been forced to meet by the roadside if the government hadn't sealed its building under construction without due process.

"We have been waiting for the government to grant us a temporary permit so that we can hold services, instead of forbidding them," Tampubolon said. "It's difficult for the 500 or so members to hold church beside the road, and it would be even more difficult if the location was moved, because most of the people live near the church."

Tampubolon said the church had purchased 1,088 square meters of land, had obtained signatures of 60 people living near the church as well as letters of agreement from the Jejalan village head and leaders, and had submitted all necessary documents to the government in 2008.

The Bekasi Regency never took any action on the application, saying the permit needed to be discussed and approved by the Bekasi Interfaith Harmony Forum.

In December the church held a Christmas service in a temporary structure on the lot.

"We held our Christmas service there because we had village level permission and were waiting on permanent permission from the regency," Tampubolon said.

The Christmas service drew a large mob of protestors claiming to act on behalf of the local citizens. The mob demanded that services end and that no Christian worship take place in the area.

The regent then recommended that the church hold services in Jejalan village hall, but when the congregation tried to do so on Jan. 3, another demonstration harried them. Since then the church has held worship services on the roadside.

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.

Indonesia shuts down radio station airing Falun Gong reports amid charges of Chinese pressure

Ali Kotarumalos

The Canadian Press (25.03.2010) / HRWF (26.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Indonesian officials have shut down a private radio station that aired reports about the Falun Gong group, saying Thursday that it did not have the proper operating license.

But the director of Radio Erabaru (New Era Radio), which broadcasts news and entertainment in Mandarin and Indonesian languages from Batam island, accused government officials of bowing to pressure from the Chinese government.

Raymond Tan said he believed the Wednesday raid and seizure of radio transmission equipment by police and officials with the Radio Frequency Monitoring Office was the result of complaints made by the Chinese Embassy.

Calls to the embassy seeking comment were not answered Thursday.

China banned the Falun Gong spiritual movement more than a decade ago, calling it an "evil cult." Some of the movement's leaders and thousands of followers were arrested.

Raymond said the Chinese Embassy had sent a letter in 2007 to Indonesian authorities complaining about the radio station's broadcasts. That pressure has continued, he maintained, saying "it was clear" that Chinese intervention played a role in the station's closure.

Waving banners, about 20 members of the station's supporters held a rally outside the government monitoring office, protesting the closure of the station. "Stop China's intervention into Indonesian press freedom," and "This is Indonesian territory, not China! Why should we listen to them?" read banners unfurled at the peaceful protest.

Gatot Dewa Broto, a spokesman for the Ministry of Communication and Information, confirmed the station was shut down but denied any Chinese role. Instead, he said the radio station did not have the correct permit to broadcast.

"Such a measure of restoring law and order is a normal thing," he said.

But Raymond said the decision was unacceptable since the radio station is awaiting a court ruling on a lawsuit filed over the ministry's refusal to grant the license since 2007.

"We have told them that we are still waiting for the Supreme Court's ruling, but they didn't care," Raymond said.

The radio station's lawyer, Soleh Ali, accused the Indonesian government of refusing to guarantee the rights of its own citizens.

"In our view, the government is no longer independent," he said.

Religion minister defends Indonesia's blasphemy law

Anita Rachman & Ulma Haryanto

The Jakarta Globe (24.03.2010) / HRWF (25.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Minister of Religious Affairs Suryadharma Ali on Wednesday sought the support of the country's largest Islamic organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama, in maintaining the country's 1965 Blasphemy Law, which is under review at the Constitutional Court.

"The consequences [if the law is annulled] are that people, figures, could establish new religions, declare new prophets, new angels," Suryadharma told thousands of NU followers during the group's 32nd national congress.

"It could be one that could trigger a harmony breakdown. I expect that NU could also [work] together to solve this problem," he said.

Suryadharma shared a stage with Minister of National Education Mohammad Nuh in Wednesday's congress to discuss religion and education issues in the country and in NU. He took the opportunity to enlist its support over the law.

The 1965 law recognizes only six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. Others are officially banned. It also prohibits alternative interpretations of recognized religions, including Islam.

In 2008, the government used the law to formally ban Ahmadiyah, a minority Islamic sect, because members held that its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was the last prophet of Islam, a claim that contradicts mainstream Muslim beliefs.

The Constitutional Court is currently reviewing the law following a demand for a review filed by human rights groups and the late former President Aburrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid, who was also a longtime former NU chairman.

The law "should be secured," he told the plenary to the cheers of NU members attending the session. "Freedom doesn't have to be absolute. There must still be rules."

Suryadharma depicted a gloomy picture of conditions if the law was annulled. He said Islam and the Koran could be interpreted at will.

"Maintaining religious harmony is essential, and maintaining harmony within the same religion is already difficult nowadays. Maintaining NU is difficult. There are some that are [moving to the] left and some to the right," he said, provoking laughter from audience members. "And it will be even more so if there are new religions."

Meanwhile, at the Constitutional Court, W. Cole Durham Jr., a professor of law and director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University in the United States, testified via video conference. He noted that Indonesia had agreed to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

"Indonesia thereby also accepted the obligation to protect freedom of expression, freedom of association, and equal protection under law, as well as to extend these protections to religious minorities," Durham said.

He agreed that the challenged provisions in the law were not only inconsistent with international human rights standards, but also open to multiple interpretations.

Also testifying in favor of the plaintiffs were a host of legal and religious scholars and experts and former officials. A verdict will be delivered in mid-April.

Blasphemy law violates women's rights

Arghea Desafti Hapsari

The Jakarta Post (15.03.2010) / HRWF (16.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The law on blasphemy tramples on the rights of women, the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) testified Friday in the judicial review of the 1965 law.

Commission chairwoman Yunianti Chuzzifah told the Constitutional Court her organization had received several reports from women who had been discriminated against because they were followers of religious sects and traditional beliefs not officially recognized by the government.

"The implementation of the 1965 Blasphemy Law ... violates women's constitutional right not to be discriminated against," Yunianti said.

"Female members of some faiths and beliefs that aren't recognized by the state can't obtain an ID card unless they list one of the official religions [on the ID], which is done against their will."

The commission testified in the review as a related party.

The Constitutional Court has so far held seven hearing in the review, filed by petitioners from NGOs and self-proclaimed supporters of pluralism in October last year.

Yunianti said many women from these unrecognized faiths had also been deprived of the right to a registered marriage.

"Children borne from the union are denied birth certificates because the mother isn't considered an individual before the law," she said.

"As the result, the children are denied the right to an education, or worse, suffer the stigma of being labeled illegitimate children."

Such a situation, she added, clearly violated children's right to grow and be free from violence and discrimination.

Yunianti cited cases of women from the Ahmadiyah sect bringing their case to her commission to tell of the hardship they endured with every attack on the group.

"They reported of being threatened with rape, and of being sexually harassed during attacks and when they took refuge," she said.

"They also told of being fired from their jobs as teachers, and of their children getting second-class treatment from teachers."

Her testimony was met with loud jeers from the gallery, mostly members of hard-line Islamic groups.

The Ahmadiyah are deemed heretics by mainstream Muslims for recognizing sect founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as a prophet.

Islamic teaching holds up Muhammad as the final prophet.

For years, Ahmadis have suffered attacks from various hard-line Muslim groups, including the fire-bombing of their mosques and homes.

Also testifying Wednesday was Jakarta Interfaith Communication Forum chairman Ahmad Syafi'i Mufid, who said that even in democracies, human rights and freedom of religion had their boundaries.

"One's freedom to embrace a religion or belief is limited by the law, which prevails to maintain security, order, health and public morality, and to protect other people's basic rights and freedom," he said.

He called on the court to dismiss the review of the law, adding that if it were revised, the government must immediately issue a regulation-in-lieu-of-law of greater clarity and detail "so as to avoid misinterpretation which could lead to chaos and vigilantism".

Culture analyst Emha Ainun Nadjib, testifying as an expert witness, said rescinding or retaining the law could both prove dangerous.

"If the law is repealed, it will create new conflicts and generate hatred," he said. "But if it's retained, there will always be anxiety."

He added he would not recommend either choice unless "all of us pledge not to threaten one another".

Christians refuse to allow officials to close Church in Indonesia

Compass Direct (11.03.2010) / HRWF (12.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Efforts by local officials in this city in West Java to close a church met with stiff resistance this month, as a defiant lawyer and weeping women refused to allow it.

Women of the Huria Christian Protestant Batak Church (HKBP) cried in protest as officials from the Bekasi Building Department on March 1 placed a brown signboard of closure on the church building in Pondok Timur, Bekasi, 12 miles (19 kilometers) from Jakarta.

The seal stayed in place for about two minutes before some of the shrieking women tore it down. The sign was trampled as furious church members stampeded over it, shouting and screaming. Bekasi city officials turned and ran as the congregation fanned out.

The defiance followed a heated debate within the same church building minutes before, as the Christians had invited the Bekasi officials inside to discuss the matter when they arrived to seal the building. The discussion soon became heated as a city official asserted that the church did not have a building permit.

The church had applied for a worship building permit in 2006, but local officials had yet to act on it, according to the church's pastor, the Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak.

At the meeting inside the church building, attorney Refer Hariyana said that the sealing process was illegal, as it requires that public notice be given.

"HKBP has never seen nor received the formal order and has not acknowledged such an order by signing a receipt," Hariyana said. "In addition, public notice must be given in the form of formal reading of the order."

Hariyana added that the legal basis for sealing the church was weak. The Joint Ministerial Decree revised in 2006 clearly states in Paragraph 21 that when there is a problem with

the building of a house of worship, it must be solved through formal consultation with local residents, he said.

"At this stage, resolution has not taken place," he said.

Hariyana said that in case such a consultation failed to resolve conflicts, then the mayor may consult with the Department of Religion – "in a just and non-prejudicial manner" – taking into account suggestions from the Interfaith Harmony Forum.

"On this point, up to March 1, the church has never been invited to talk with the mayor," he said.

The Joint Ministerial Decree had not been correctly applied in the sealing of the church, Hariyana concluded, adding that contested cases could always be taken to court.

"We still have some legal avenues open," he said. "This is not the time for a surprise sealing."

Hariyana also cited Mayor Decree No. 16 (2006) regarding the construction of a house of worship in Bekasi City, where Article 11 states that before a building is sealed there must be three written notices given. This process also had not been carried out, he said.

"Because you have not followed the procedures which I have outlined, we will act as if the sealing never took place," Hariyana told city officials as members of the congregation cheered.

The sealing of the church would thus be illegal, so the government had broken the law, he said. Hariyana said that HKBP members would not hinder officials from carrying out their duties, but that they would be named in a lawsuit.

One of the officials, identified only as Pemana, responded, "Go ahead and sue."

"If the seal is in place," Hariyana said, "We can break it because the act of sealing is illegal. Agreed?"

"Agreed," answered the 75 parishioners present.

With the meeting ending in a deadlock, city officials prepared to place the signboard to seal the church, with the ensuing tumult.

Mayor fails to show

Prior to the showdown, at 10 a.m. Pastor Simanjuntak, the Rev. Pieterson Purba and Hariyana had a scheduled a meeting with Bekasi Mayor Mochtar Mohamad – promised by an official named H. Junaedi during a demonstration on Feb. 28 – only to discover that the visit had not been placed on the mayor's schedule.

As they waited, Pastor Simanjuntak received a mobile phone call saying that city building officials were at the church site and had been there since 9 a.m.

The following day, March 2, the HKBP leaders and leaders from three other churches were able to meet the mayor, who promised to help them find new places of worship. While they waited for the new sites, the mayor suggested, the HKBP church could use a multipurpose room belonging to the Social Department starting March 7.

Subsequently, Pastor Simanjuntak and members of the congregation rejected the proposal, reasoning that moving somewhere else was equivalent to being ejected from their building.

Worship resumed as usual at 7 a.m. on Sunday, March 7, under the strict watch of police and soldiers who had stood guard all night. The service finished two hours later without incident.

"Because this was a congregational decision, from next Sunday onwards we will be holding services in the house of worship here at No. 14 Puyuh Raya Street," said Pastor Simanjuntak.

Constitutional court taking up Indonesia's thorny religious row

Nivell Rayda

The Jakarta Globe (04.02.2010) / HRWF (08.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Constitutional Court on Thursday held its first session to review the 1965 law on religious blasphemy, much to the chagrin of the government and hard-line Muslim groups.

The law, which dates back to the last years of former President Sukarno's rule, was challenged in 2009 by the late President Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid and several human rights organizations, including Imparsial and the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI).

The petitioners argued that the Law on the Prevention of Blasphemy and Abuse of Religion, which carried jail terms of up to five years, was unconstitutional as it inhibited religious freedom by recognizing only six religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, while rejecting all others. The law bans people from publicly espousing or gathering popular support in favor of certain religious interpretations and forces citizens to follow only one of six state-sanctioned religions.

Hendardi, the chairman of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, one of the plaintiffs, said 200 human rights violations occurred in 2009 because the law had been abused as an excuse to intimidate Christians and Muslim splinter groups.

"The 1945 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, yet these rights are neglected and not enforced," Hendardi said. "Meanwhile, there are people who are forced to practice their religion in secrecy out of fear of intimidation."

Hendardi highlighted the plight of the Ahmadiyah, a Muslim sect who he says is constantly threatened and pushed to return to mainstream Islam.

The law, however, has ardent defenders. In front of the court, at least 200 members of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the Indonesian Clerics Forum (FUI) and Hizbut Taher Indonesia rallied to condemn the judicial review, saying "religion must be kept pure and safe from blasphemous acts."

Equally as vocal in rejecting the review, Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali said the law had guaranteed every Indonesian's right to choose their faith.

"Even the plaintiffs have religions, so their constitutional rights have been granted and ensured by the government," Suryadharma told the court, to the cheers of FPI members attending the hearing.

"If the law didn't exist, there would be no protection against those who obstruct someone from performing religious activities and those who disrespect religion."

Justice and Human Rights Minister Patrialis Akbar told the court that reviewing the law would do more harm than good.

"The government fears that there would be horizontal conflicts should the law be annulled or changed," he said. "[Social] friction would increase if people were allowed to make their own loose interpretations of religion."

Also among the defense were several members of the House of Representatives, including Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) lawmaker Adang Daradjatun and Ruhut Sitompul, a Democrat.

The court's chief of administrative affairs, Kasianur Sidahuruk, said that 31 experts had been invited to speak including former Constitutional Court chief Jimly Asshiddiqie and former Justice Minister Yusril Ihza Mahendra. The lawyer said the plaintiffs would present eight expert witnesses including prominent Catholic priest Frans Magnis-Suseno and cultural expert Arswendo Atmowiloto.

The government has also prepared experts including former Supreme Court chief Bagir Manan and former Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) Lukman Hakim Syaifuddin.

The hearing is to resume on Thursday.

Two Churches forced to close in Indonesia

Compass Direct (04.02.2010) / HRWF (08.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Local governments have ordered the closure of two churches on Indonesia's Java island.

Under pressure from Islamist groups, authorities ordered Christian Baptist Church in Sepatan, Tangerang district, Banten Province to cease services. In Pondok Timur, near Bekasi in West Java, officials abruptly closed the Huria Christian Protestant Batak Church (HKBP) after delaying a building permit for four years.

Tangerang district authorities issued a decree on Jan. 21 ordering all worship activities to cease at the Baptist church. At a meeting in the district offices, officials pressured church officials to sign a statement that they would stop all worship activities, but they refused.

The Rev. Bedali Hulu said that he received the government order on Jan. 26. In addition, a sign was placed on his church's worship building saying, "Stop! This building violates government decree number 10 of 2006."

Hulu told Compass that on Dec. 7 a banner was placed on the street leading to the housing area that said, "We Reject the Presence of Uncontrolled Churches in our Area," and "We Reject Uncontrolled Churches in Sepatan District." On Dec. 12, citizens presented a letter rejecting the presence of the congregation to church leaders.

The church has permission to worship from both local citizens and the Christians in accordance with a Joint Ministerial Decree promulgated in 1969 and revised in 2006, Hulu said.

"However, the pressure from Islamic groups is so strong, it's as if the local government can do nothing," he said.

Islamic groups stirred up demonstrations against the church on Dec. 19, when 30 people demonstrated during a Christmas celebration for children, and another demonstration followed the next day. On Dec. 27, a large crowd from the Islamic Defenders' Front (FPI) arrived and demanded that worship cease.

Police on Dec. 29 issued a letter ordering that services stop because they violated local government regulations. The next day church leaders met with local officials but did not reach an agreement.

The church of 130 people has been facing such obstacles since 2006. It began in 2005 after reporting to local authorities and receiving permission.

Opposition from the FPI began the next year, and the church was forced to move services from house to house. On Nov. 4, 2007, as children attended Sunday school, around 10 FPI members arrived and broke up the meeting. On Nov. 19 of that year, several FPI members 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.

Last year, unidentified people burned the church building on Sept. 20; police have done nothing, he said.

Closure Order

Near the city of Bekasi, West Java, the government has given a deadline for the cessation of services to the Huria Christian Protestant Batak Church in Pondok Timur. The Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak said that services were ordered to cease after last Sunday (Jan. 31).

The government requested that church officials sign a letter agreeing to this order, but they refused, Simanjuntak said.

The pastor said a local official told them that the order was based on a meeting between the local government and nearby residents who objected to worship services. Simanjuntak told Compass that they were invited to a meeting with the residents who objected, the village officials and the head of the Interfaith Harmony Forum for Bekasi City, Haji Hasnul Chloid Pasaribu. Instead of discussing the situation, however, officials immediately gave the church a letter stating that permission for services extended only to Jan. 31.

"The letter was composed after consulting only one side," said Simanjuntak. "The church aspirations were never heard."

The church had been worshipping at that location since 2006.

"From the beginning we worked on the permission, starting at the block level and village level," he said. "At that time we received permission to worship at my home. We never had problems in our relations with the local citizens."

The church applied for a worship building permit in 2006, but local officials have yet to act on it, he said.

"Are we not allowed to worship while awaiting the building permit?" Simanjuntak said.

Rev. Gomar Gultom, general secretary of the Indonesian Fellowship of Churches, said that the organization will formulate a request to the Indonesian Senate to provide solutions for the two churches.

"In the near future, we will meet senators from the law and religion committees to discuss this matter," Gomar said.

Johnny Simanjuntak of the Indonesian National Human Rights Committee told Compass that the government has failed to carry out its constitutional duty to protect freedom of worship for all citizens.

"Clearly the stoppage of any particular religious activity by the government is proof that the government is neglecting the human rights of its citizens," he said.

Two partially constructed Church buildings burned in Indonesia

Outside agitators torch structures; Christians have waited years for building permits

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (29.01.2010) / HRWF (30.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Suspected Islamic extremists burned two church buildings under construction in a village in North Sumatra on Jan. 22.

The attackers came from outside the area to burn the partially constructed buildings of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Church (HKBP) and the Pentecostal Church (GPDI) in Sibuhuan village, Padang Lawas Residency, during daylight hours, said the Rev. S. Lubis of the HKBP church.

"It was a quiet day when suddenly hundreds of people arrived on motorcycles and burned the empty church," he said. "After that, the mob moved 200 meters down the road and burned the empty Pentecostal church."

No people were hurt in the fires. Lubis said that those who burned the church buildings were not from the area.

"We didn't know any of the mob who burned the church," he said. "When we asked our neighbors, they didn't know them either, and they did not help burn the church."

Lubis said that his church had been worshipping at the site since 1970, and that in 1981 they had erected a simple structure. In 2009 – after local officials had held up an application for a permit to erect a permanent building for five years – the church began construction. Area Muslims stopped the construction before it was finished.

"All this time we never had problems with the local citizens," Lubis told Compass by telephone. "Outside agitators provoked the local people to reject the church."

The Rev. Marolop Sinaga, HKBP district pastor for south Tapanuli, told Compass that church officials held a meeting in December with the local Indonesian Muslim Leaders Council and the Padang Lawas government. The Muslim leaders demanded that construction stop because no building permit had been issued.

The church complied and stopped construction, even though the building permit had been in process for five years, Sinaga said. Later local Muslims demanded that church dismantle the parts that had been built, to which the church agreed.

The dismantling of the partial construction began on Jan. 13 but apparently did not proceed fast enough for the mob that gutted the two church buildings, Sinaga said.

The HKBP church in Sibuhuan has 272 members. Members of the congregation have been traumatized and many have fled fearing for their safety, church leaders said.

The Rev. Charles Hutabarat of the Pentecostal Church said his congregation began worshipping in homes in 1990. Having waited three years for their permit to be approved, they were in the middle of their building program, he said.

"Because the local citizens had approved the presence of the church, we were surprised that our church was burned like this," Hutabarat told Compass.

The head of Padang Lawas Residency, Basyrah Lubis, told Compass that the government will facilitate the granting of building permits for houses of worship.

"We have met with other residency leaders such as the police chief, the military commander, the department of religion officials, and other Padang Lawas leaders, and we have decided to process the building permit applications quickly," he said. "Also, the two churches will be moved; we are searching for a location which will be free of problems in the future."

Lubis also said he would guarantee the safety of the congregations.

"In addition, we are going to form an Interfaith Harmony Forum for the residency, because we have never had one previously," he said. "By Feb. 15, this forum will be established. In the meantime, the two congregations will hold services in member homes."

Christians most hit by religious freedom violations in Indonesia

Mob succeeds in getting local official to shut down HKBP church in West Java

By Samuel Rionaldo

Compass Direct (21.01.2010) / HRWF (25.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A moderate Muslim research institute focusing on interfaith issues in Indonesia reported 35 cases of government violations of religious freedom – including 28 against Christians – and 93 instances of community intolerance of churches in 2009.

The Wahid Institute issued a year-end report of violations that included the revocation of the building permit for the HKBP Cinere Church – later overturned in court – opposition to a Catholic Church in Purwakarta and an order forbidding worship by the Filadelfia Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Church (HKBP) in Bekasi, West Java.

The highest number of violations occurred in West Java, with 10 cases, including seven against Christians; next was East Java with eight, including four against Christians, followed by Jakarta Province with four (three against Christians). In Central Java, two of three religious violation cases were against Christians, and in West Nusa Tenggara, one of the three violations violated Christians' rights.

Government infractions included closing churches and failing to intervene in mob actions. Police were cited in 18 cases, provincial governments in eight, village and sub-district governments in six cases each and courts in two incidents.

Just as government violations were highest in West Java, community intolerance there was also highest with 32 cases, of which 14 were against Christians. Next was Jakarta, where eight of 15 cases of community intolerance were against Christians, then East Java where six of 14 cases hurt Christians. In Central Java, Christians were the victims in five of the 13 cases of community intolerance.

In West Java, the root problem is the spread of hatred against religious groups, including Christians and Jews, according to the report.

While the reported violations of religious freedom were lower than in 2008, the issue of religious intolerance continued to grow during 2009, aided by legislative and presidential elections as religion is often used to gain votes in Indonesian elections, according to the study. The overall figure of 128 cases of violations of religious freedom by government or society in 2009 represents a drop from the 2008 figure of 234 cases, according to the Wahid Institute.

Yenny Zanuba Wahid, director of the institute, told Compass that the government has not considered freedom of religion an important issue that needed attention. As a result, the government has not addressed reports of intolerance even in the face of international pressure.

"The government has been timid to acknowledge violations of religious freedom, but these are real and are carried out directly by government bodies or indirectly as a result [of government] policies," Wahid said.

Muslims make up 88.2 percent of Indonesia's population of about 240 million people, with Protestant Christians making up 5.9 percent, Catholics 3.1 percent, Hindus 0.8 percent, Buddhists 0.2 percent, and other religions 0.2 percent.

Church Closure

In West Java, mob efforts to shut down the Filadelfia Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Church (HKBP) in Bekasi succeeded on Dec. 31 when the district officer issued a decree ordering a stop to all worship activities at the site of the church building under construction.

The decree ordered that the construction of the building stop, and that the structure not be used for worship until the building permit process was final. The district officer based his recommendation upon a 1990 rule regarding building permits in Bekasi.

Tigor Tambubolon, head of the church building committee, acknowledged that the building permit had not been formally granted even though the process had been under way since 2000.

"We already have the permission of the Jejalen citizens," Tambubolon told Compass. "That's why we were brave enough to hold Christmas Eve services."

Last Christmas Eve hundreds of protestors demanding a halt to worship demonstrated against services at the site, where 279 Christians had gathered.

A New Year's service scheduled to take place at the site moved to the office of the village head due to fears that protestors would become unruly. Police Chief Herry Wibowo said his officers guarded the church site at that time.

The Rev. Palti Panjaitan of Filadelfia HKBP told Compass that the church had been worshipping in the area since 2000 by meeting at various members' homes. As the congregation grew, they rented a building combining a home and store in Vila Bekasi 2 Tambun.

"The local citizens demonstrated against our worship services," said Panjaitan. "From there we moved to a member's home in Jejalan village. We profited because the Jejalan citizens were very good."

Eventually the church bought a piece of land there. A number of the community leaders and the village head gave their agreement to build the Filadelfia HKBP church there.

The Interfaith Harmony Forum of Bekasi district gave approval for the building with the stipulation that the church obey a joint ministerial decree revised in 2006 regarding construction of houses of worship. The building committee obtained signatures of 259 non-Christians endorsing the project, though the joint decree required only 60 signatures. Then the building committee wrote a formal request for a building permit.

Church elder Tambubolon, however, added that a sub-district officer collected signatures from citizens opposed to the construction of a house of worship in Jejalan. The total number of signatures is unknown, but the sub-district office sent a letter to the district officer rejecting the building permit.

Nevertheless, Tambubolon said, the church is not considering a lawsuit over the district officer's decree.

"We are going to continue worshipping, because it is the right of every citizen," he said. "If we are forbidden to worship even in the village office, we will continue to do so."
