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Religion minister rejects child marriage reform

AFP (17.03.2010) / HRWF Int. (23.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Malaysia's religion minister on Tuesday defended Islamic laws that allow girls under 16 to marry, amid a controversy over two youngsters who were married off to middle-aged men.

The issue has flared in Malaysia after reports that two girls aged 10 and 11 were wed in the conservative northern state of Kelantan last month. They have now been removed from their husbands.

Rights groups have called for the reform of Islamic laws that allow marriage under the age of 16 if religious officials give their consent. Sharia law runs in parallel with civil law in multi-ethnic Malaysia.

"There is no need to amend the law," Jamil Khir Baharom, a cabinet minister in charge of religious affairs, told reporters.

"The law already exists... marrying someone aged 16 and below requires the consent of the court. The court does not simply grant the consent," he said.

"Maturity is a subjective question. It depends on the development of the person. Maturity is not based on age solely."

Pressure group Sisters in Islam has called for an end to child marriages, saying the practice was "unacceptable" but continued in Malaysia because of a "belief that Muslim girls can be married off once they reach puberty".

"The minimum age of marriage for Muslim girls must be raised to 18 to be in compliance with the Child Act which defines children as those below the age of 18," it said in a statement.

Other citizens in the multicultural country -- where the population is dominated by Muslim Malays -- are not permitted to marry before the age of 18.

Malaysian authorities are investigating the case of the two girls in Kelantan, both linked to a man who is accused of leading an Islamic cult.

He is accused of marrying the 11-year-old girl and giving away his 10-year-old daughter to a family friend.

Sharia court officials told the New Straits Times Tuesday the 11-year-old's marriage was not approved in court.

The girl was found outside a mosque in the nation's capital over the weekend and is now being treated in hospital.

Women, family and community development minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil has spoken out against the practice.

"A child of that age does not have the choice or capacity to give her full consent and, as such, child marriage is viewed within the context of force and coercion," she said in a statement to AFP.

Malaysia canes women for adultery

Three women have been caned under Islamic law for committing adultery, a Malaysian minister has said

This was the country's first ever case involving flogging of women

Al Jazeera English (18.02.2010) / HRWF Int. (19.02.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hishamuddin Tun Hussein, the Malaysian home affairs minister, said on Wednesday the sentences were carried out on February 9 after a sharia court found them guilty of extra-marital sex.

"It was carried out perfectly," Hishamuddin said in a statement. "Even though the caning did not injure them [the women], they said it caused pain within them."

Two of the women were whipped six times while the third received four strokes of the rotan (cane).

He said one woman was released from prison on Sunday, another will be freed in the next few days while the third will go free in June.

Controversy

The women, and four men, were caned following a decision in the religious courts in December, Hishamuddin said.

His comments are being seen as a signal that the authorities could be preparing to cane another Muslim woman, Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno, who was arrested last year for drinking beer and sentenced to six strokes of the cane.

Kartika's case, which was to have been the first time a woman was caned under Islamic law in Malaysia, is under review following widespread publicity and international criticism. The case, when first reported, raised concerns that the nation's secular status is under threat, eroding the rights of some 40-45 per cent of the country's ethnic minorities.

Hishammuddin said Kartika's case had flagged concerns about how women should be flogged and that the recent canings demonstrated that the prisons department can carry out punishments in accordance with Islamic law.

Under the sharia, the women have to be whipped in a seated position by a female prison guard and be fully clothed.

"I hope this will not be misunderstood so much that it defiles the purity of Islam," Hishammuddin said, according to state media.

"The punishment is to teach and give a chance to those who have fallen off the path to return and build a better life in future."

New questions

The caning, however, has raised new questions about whether a state religious court can sentence women to be caned when federal law precludes women from such a punishment, while men below 50 can be punished by caning.

Malaysia has a dual-track legal system with Islamic criminal and family laws, which are applicable only to Muslims, running alongside civil laws.

News of the women's caning sparked public outrage, with lawyers and rights groups on Thursday blaming the government for allowing it.

Ragunath Kesavan, president of the Malaysian Bar, said it was worrying that the punishment had gone ahead even as the caning issue was being hotly debated by Muslim scholars, religious groups and human rights activists.

"The impression was that Kartika's case would be the first so I've got no idea what has happened," he said.

"It's not as if this is the Middle East... it's not a good signal that they're [the government] sending out."

"We are against any form of corporal punishment, for men or women," Kesavan said. "The fact is that any form of whipping is barbaric."

The case is expected to fuel a debate over rising "Islamisation" in Malaysia, where religious courts have been clamping down on moral offences, as well as a ban on Muslims consuming alcohol that had been rarely enforced.

Caning 'epidemic'

London-based human rights watchdog Amnesty International on Wednesday urged Malaysia to end a caning "epidemic", saying the women's case was "just the tip of the iceberg".

Donna Guest, the group's deputy Asia-Pacific director, said in a statement that Malaysian authorities caned more than 35,000 mostly foreigners since 2002.

"The government needs to abolish this cruel and degrading punishment, no matter what the offense," she said.

Sisters in Islam, a local group of Muslim women activists, said the caning "constitutes further discrimination against Muslim women in Malaysia".

Malaysia church attacks continue in use of 'Allah' row

Rachel Harvey

BBC (11.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (12.01.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Another Christian church has been attacked in Malaysia - the ninth such incident since Friday.

No one was injured in the attack on an evangelical Christian church, but buildings were damaged by what appear to have been home-made petrol bombs.

In another case a church was vandalised with black paint.

The attacks appear to have been triggered by a High Court ruling last month that overturned a government ban on non-Muslims using the word "Allah".

The government is appealing against the decision.

Deep resentments

The latest attack caused limited physical damage - just a burned door and a charred entranceway.

But the political implications may be more serious.

Tensions have flared after Malaysia's High Court ruled that a Roman Catholic newspaper, the Herald, was permitted to use the word Allah to describe God in its Malay language editions.

Muslim groups argue that Christians using a word so closely associated with Islam could be a ploy to win converts.

Christians make up around 9% of the population in the majority Muslim state. Most non-Muslims are ethnically Indian or Chinese.

The row over the use of the word Allah has exposed deep resentments over the treatment of minorities and freedom of religion in Malaysia.

A government minister told foreign diplomats on Monday that the church attacks were the work of extremists.

"These were not just attacks on houses of worship," he said. "These were attacks on the values and freedoms all Malaysians share."

Under the slogan "One Malaysia", the government has made racial harmony a central policy. Its commitment to that policy is now being severely tested.

The "Allah" ban is unusual in the Muslim world. The Arabic word is commonly used by Christians to describe God in such countries as Egypt, Syria and even nearby Indonesia, which is the world's largest Muslim nation.

Church buildings attacked in Malaysia following court decision

Muslim groups angered by ruling to allow Catholic newspaper to use word 'Allah'

By Jasmine Kay

Compass Direct (11.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (12.01.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In unprecedented acts that stunned Christians in Malaysia, suspected Islamists have attacked eight church buildings since the country's High Court ruled that a Catholic weekly could use the word "Allah."

Firebombs were thrown into the compounds of four churches in Kuala Lumpur and neighboring Petaling Jaya on Friday (Jan. 8); three more attacks occurred on Sunday (Jan. 10) in Taiping, Melaka and Miri; and another church building was hit today in Seremban. There were no reports of injuries.

Judge Lau Bee Lan delivered the controversial court ruling on Dec. 31, arguing that the Herald had a constitutional right to use the word "Allah" for God in the Malay section of its multi-lingual newspaper. The ruling caused an uproar among many Muslim groups widely reported to have called for nationwide protests after Friday prayers, asserting that "Allah" can be used only in the context of Islam. Among groups calling for protests were the Muslim Youth Movement and the National Association of Muslim Students.

Inflammatory rhetoric has emerged in the escalating conflict; at a protest in Shah Alam since protests began on Friday, a speaker at one rally urged listeners to "burn churches," according to the online news site Malaysian Insider. The crowd reportedly stood in stunned silence.

Malaysia's Home Ministry filed an appeal against the High Court decision on Jan. 4. Two days later, the court allowed a freeze on the decision to permit the Herald to use the word "Allah" pending hearing in the Court of Appeal.

The attacked churches were Metro Tabernacle (Assembly of God) in Kuala Lumpur, and three churches in Petaling Jaya: Life Chapel (Brethren), Assumption Church (Catholic) and Good Shepherd Lutheran Church (Lutheran); also damaged were All Saints' Church (Anglican) in Taiping, Melaka Baptist Church in Melaka (vandalized but not firebombed), Good Shepherd Church (Catholic) in Miri (pelted with stones) and Sidang Injil Borneo (Evangelical Church of Borneo) in Seremban.

Though there were no casualties, a number of the church buildings were damaged in the attacks. Metro Tabernacle suffered the worst damage, with the ground floor of its three-storey building, which housed its administrative office, completely gutted. The main door of the church in Seremban was charred.

The Rev. Ong Sek Leang, senior pastor of Metro Tabernacle, reportedly said that the church harbors no ill feelings toward the culprits and would forgive those responsible, but that it does not condone the acts.

Most of the other church buildings suffered minor damage, though the Assumption Church was spared when the Molotov cocktail thrown into its compound failed to go off. The Melaka Baptist Church building was splashed with black paint, while stones were thrown into the Good Shepherd Church building in Miri.

The Malaysian Insider reported on Friday (Jan. 8) that two other churches received telephone threats from unknown sources.

Christian leaders, government and opposition leaders, and Non-Governmental Organizations have condemned the attacks. Police have promised to increase security around church buildings, but Inspector-General of Police Chief Musa Hassan told the Malaysian Insider that churches must beef up their own security since there is a shortage of police personnel.

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

Shocked

The spate of church attacks shocked the Christian community and nation, as acts of violence on places of worship are unprecedented in Malaysia.

Ramon Navaratnam, Chairman of the Centre of Public Policy Studies, said in a press statement on Friday (Jan. 8) that the attacks marked a "troubling trend" and "a low point in our nation's history."

The same day, Malaysian Bar Council Chairman Ragnath Kesavan said in a press statement that the attacks were "shocking and offensive" and that "all right-minded Malaysians must condemn it as indecent and unacceptable."

Christian leaders strongly denounced the attacks and have asked the government to safeguard the community and its places of worship. They have also called on the government to take firm steps against the perpetrators while paving the way for greater understanding between the different religious communities.

The Rev. Dr. Hermen Shastri, general secretary of the Council of Churches Malaysia, called on the government to "show zero tolerance for the use, threat or incitement, of violence as a means to pressure the decision of the court." The Rev. Eu Hong Seng, chairman of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship, called on the government "to take the necessary steps to educate those who lack understanding and are 'easily confused' to be mature-minded in a progressive democratic society."

Leaders on both sides of the political divide have also denounced the attacks, while a number of opposition leaders – including Anwar Ibrahim, adviser to the People's Justice Party – put the blame on the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the leading partner in the ruling coalition government. Anwar reportedly accused UMNO-owned newspaper Utusan Malaysia of having incited Muslims over the court decision.

A number of local commentators have also criticized Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein for not defusing rising tensions in the initial days of the court ruling. They have also come under fire for saying they would allow public demonstrations by Muslim groups to proceed, and that they would take action "only if things got out of hand."

Despite the attacks, a check with parishioners of several churches in the Klang Valley showed Christians were undeterred by the acts of violence and continued to gather for worship yesterday.

Urging Christians to pray, Sam Ang, secretary-general of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship, told Compass, "We see this as an opportunity to trust in the Lord and to revitalize our faith, especially for second-generation Christians."

Malaysia appeals 'Allah' for Christians ruling

AP (04.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (07.01.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Malaysia's government filed an appeal Monday to fight a court ruling that allowed non-Muslims to use the word "Allah" to refer to God, a decision that triggered protests in the Muslim-majority country.

The government says Allah is an Islamic word and its use by others would mislead Muslims, implying it could be used to convert them to other religions. Allah, an Arabic word, predates Islam and is used by Arabic-speaking Christians in places such as Egypt and Syria.

Protests by Muslim groups, although peaceful, have raised fears of friction between the Malay Muslim majority and the large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities, who mainly practice Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Religious minorities and some moderate Muslims have welcomed the High Court decision as a victory against what they say is institutionalized religious discrimination here.

Authorities deny any discrimination, but recently confiscated 10,000 copies of Malay-language Bibles containing the word Allah.

The Home Ministry is seeking a reversal of the Dec. 31 court decision and will ask for the High Court's ruling to be suspended until the appeal is decided, said government lawyer Kamaluddin Mohammad Said.

Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin on Monday advised people to be calm.

"I think we should have faith in the government leadership to tackle the problem. We don't want a situation where the court decision can cause anger and tension between the various races in the country," he told reporters.

The ruling was in response to a lawsuit filed in late 2007 by The Herald, the Roman Catholic Church's main publication in Malaysia. The government ban on the use of the word Allah had affected The Herald's Malay-language edition, read mostly by indigenous tribes who converted to Christianity decades ago.

Efforts by Christians to use Allah in Malay-language literature have been perceived by some Muslims "as a plot to convert Malay Muslims to Christianity," Anas Zubedy, a popular Muslim blogger on social and political issues, wrote after the court verdict, adding his support of the ruling.
