

Christian Publications Barred From Saying 'Allah'™

A Catholic newspaper and evangelical church have filed lawsuits against the Malaysian government, which argues that a Christian newspaper using the term "Allah" could confuse Muslims.



[] Catholic newspaper and an evangelical church have filed lawsuits against the Malaysian government after authorities ruled against use of the word "Allah" in Christian publications.

The Herald, a 13-year-old Catholic weekly, sued the government in December for prohibiting it from using the word "Allah" to refer to God, Compass Direct News reported. The government had argued that use of the term might cause confusion among Muslims, who make up about 60 percent of Malaysia's population, Compass said.

The government had threatened the *Herald* with closure or revocation of its printing permit. But following protests by the Christian community, the *Herald's* printing permit was renewed just two days prior to expiration.

The Rev. Lawrence Andrew, the editor of the paper, said that the *Herald* was still using the word "Allah" as the case was waiting to be heard in court.

"It is difficult to understand why the government says that the word 'Allah'—when used by non-Muslims—will confuse Muslims," Andrew said. "All publications irrespective of religion or ideology are scrutinized. It is a way of monitoring peace in the nation."

The Evangelical Church of Borneo (ECB) in the eastern Malaysian state of Sabah has also sued the government for prohibiting the import of Christian educational materials for

children containing the word "Allah." Authorities withheld two other titles the church was trying to import, Compass reported. An out-of-court settlement has failed, and ECB is proceeding with the case.

Meanwhile, the government recently confiscated English-language Christian children's books with illustrations of prophets as well as books that use the word "Allah," according to the Malaysian online news agency .

The illustrations were deemed offensive to Muslims since Islam, which shares some prophets in common with Christianity, prohibits the portrayal of prophets, Compass reported.

The Rev. Hermen Shastri, general secretary of the Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM), questioned how the books could be offensive to Muslims when they were not meant for them. Shastri urged the government to take immediate action to stop such seizures, Compass reported.

The Malaysian government also recently banned 11 books, including Don Richardson's *Secrets of the Koran*, for misrepresenting Islam by linking it to terrorism and the mistreatment of women, Assist News Service reported.

The Malaysian Internal Security Ministry issued the ban in January based on the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984, which requires all print media in the country to obtain a license and abide by its strict regulations.

In another example of the government curbing religious freedoms, a customs officer confiscated 32 Bibles from a citizen returning from a trip to the Philippines Jan. 28, according to .

Juliana Nichols produced a letter from her parish priest stating the English Bibles were meant for use in her church, but the customs officer told her the texts needed to be cleared with authorities, Compass reported.

Sunni Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, where there

is growing pressure for the Asian nation to become more Islamic and introduce harsher Islamic laws, according to the latest edition of Operation World. Ethnic Malay Muslims make up about 60 percent of the 27 million people.

In April 2005, Prime Minister Abdullah bin Ahmad Badawi declared that copies of the Malay-language Bible must have the words "Not for Muslims" printed on the front, and could be distributed only in churches and Christian bookshops, according to the International Religious Freedom Report. **—Eric Tiansay for Christian Retailing**