

Terror in Indonesia

Ever since American Christians were jolted awake about five years ago to the persecution crisis affecting Christians all over the world, much has been done at the national level in the United States to draw attention to the problem. Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, mandating the creation of an International Freedom Commission that will report directly to the president. It also ordered the creation of the post of ambassador-at-large for religious freedom in the State Department, responsible for publishing annually a report on the status of religious freedom around the world.

Several outstanding senators and members of the House—especially Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas and Rep. Frank Wolf of Virginia—have focused relentlessly on persecution issues and have taken every opportunity to alert Americans to what is going on.

The new element introduced by the events of September 11 is that the supporters of “Islamism”—the ideology of Osama bin Laden that seeks to impose a global utopian Islamic theocracy by force—are quite open about declaring a war upon non-Muslim religions. Viewers of CNN will have noticed that the footage of Al-Qaeda’s recruiting video, frequently used as visual backdrop for bin Laden stories, portrays terrorist trainees charging into a building and firing pistols at the outline of a man on the opposite wall. In the center of the outline is a Christian cross.

“Islamists,” the commonly accepted term for Islamic political radicals, have repeatedly made it clear that they are indeed

fighting a religious war and that Christianity in general is one of their targets. Often they lump Christianity and Judaism together as the chief obstacles to Islamic world dominion, with a conspiracy-theory view of their chief adversary as "Crusader-Zionists."

President Bush and other senior administration officials are certainly correct to emphasize that the United States is not fighting a war against Islam. But we are indeed fighting a war against Islamists.

Unfortunately the religion of Islam can certainly be used to rationalize this worldview. The overall thrust of the Quran is aggressive toward non-Muslims. One Quranic verse directs followers of Islam to "fight against" Christians and Jews. In sura 5:60 we read that Allah has transformed Christians and Jews into "apes and swine" who "worship evil."

In addition, throughout most of Islamic history, according to the pre-eminent American scholar of Islam Bernard Lewis of Princeton University, jihad was overwhelmingly understood by Islamic scholars and theologians in its military sense, though it can mean "struggle" in the inner sense of a Muslim's wrestling against sin.

It is thus especially worrying when the Web site of the Islamist Laskar Jihad in Indonesia openly advocates jihad against the Christians of Sulawesi, an island to the northeast of Java.

Laskar Jihad is led by Jafar Umar Thalib, an Indonesian Islamist who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan and by his own admission met bin Laden in Peshawar, Pakistan, in

1987. On his Web site , Thalib denies any current association with Al-Qaeda. His supporters, however, make no effort to conceal the connection.

When Steve Snyder, president of International Christian Concern, visited the Poso district in Sulawesi recently, he photographed Laskar Jihad checkpoints with posters of bin Laden with the words "Our Leader" on them. The Laskar Jihad Web site says Indonesian Muslims have an absolute right to conduct jihad against Sulawesi's Christians without interference from the government.

One threat of an imminent Laskar Jihad onslaught against the 68,000 Christians at the heart of Poso was forestalled when Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri in December ordered several thousand troops into the area to disperse the Islamist warriors. It may well have been the answer to a worldwide concert of prayer.

But Indonesia's Christians are still under immense threat. More prayer is needed, along with letters to President Bush and members of Congress to pressure the Indonesian government to do even more to protect and rescue their country's Christians.