

After Attacks, Christian Leaders in Indonesia Decry Lax Security

✖ Christian leaders faulted Indonesian authorities for security breaches that allowed Islamic extremist mobs this week to attack a defendant convicted of defaming Islam, the judge that sentenced him, two churches and a Christian school.

The judge in Temanggung, Central Java on Tuesday (Feb. 8) sentenced Antonius Richmond Bawengan to five years in prison – the maximum allowed under Indonesia’s “blasphemy” law – for distributing pamphlets that allegedly disparaged the Kaaba, the black cube-shaped building in Mecca, Saudi Arabia that Muslims face when praying, source said.

Not satisfied with the five-year sentence, Islamist mobs rushed toward the defendant and judge, who were whisked out of the courtroom. Crowds outside began to break windows and burn vehicles around the courthouse, also damaging the lobby, and before nightfall more than 1,000 Muslim extremists had damaged Sts. Peter and Paul Church and the Indonesia Pentecostal Church, as well as Shekinah Christian School. The school belongs to the Indonesia Bethel Church of Temanggung.

The mob reportedly wounded a missionary priest from the Sts. Peter and Paul church identified only as the Rev. Saldanha.

The Rev. Gomar Gultom, general secretary of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, told Compass that his organization condemned all violence against members of any faith.

“We also condemn the state, which has committed such omission when violence occurred,” he said.

Gultom said that the state should protect every religion and

belief in this country as stated in Indonesia's constitution.

The secretary of the Indonesian Bishops Conference, the Rev. Benny Susetyo, said he has asked the government to definitively resolve the growing problem of anti-Christian violence in Indonesia, saying such incidents have repeatedly occurred. He urged police to arrest and punish the assailants immediately.

"If the government does not act, those who have committed violence may feel above the law," Susetyo told Compass. "And that means legal Indonesian civilization has been destroyed."

Bawengan was traveling to Magelang, East Java when he stopped in nearby Kenalan village, outside Temanggung in Kranggan district, on Oct. 3, 2010. A source said Bawengan took the opportunity to distribute pamphlets containing material that was considered insulting to Muslims, and he was arrested on Oct. 26.

"In his books and pamphlets, Antonius Bawengan was considered to have insulted the Kaaba, which is a sacred place for Muslims," said the source on condition of anonymity.

Indonesia's defamation of religion statute, Article 156(A) of the Penal Code, is based on law adopted by presidential decision in 1965 and stipulates up to five years of prison for anyone who publicly "gives expression to feelings or commits an act which principally has the character of being at enmity with, abusing or staining a religion adhered to in Indonesia; or with the intention to prevent a person to adhere to any religion based on the belief of the almighty God."

Fire and Stones

A day after the Temanggung attack, radical Islamists got local officials to seal a church in Taman Galaxi, Bekasi, West Java Province, according to Theophilus Bela, secretary general of the Indonesian Committee on Religion and Peace and president of the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum.

The Protestant Church of West Indonesia Galilea (GPIB Galilea) had also been attacked last year, Bela said in a press statement. The area has seen several instances of Islamist hostility, although police were able to avert rioting in the sealing of the GPIB Galilea church on Wednesday (Feb. 9), according to Bela.

The incidents against Christians followed Islamist violence against the minority Muslim Ahmadiyya sect earlier this week. On Sunday (Feb. 6) an Islamic extremist mob attacked an Ahmadiyya congregation in Cikeusik, Pandeglang, Banten Province, killing three and severely wounding others, according to Bela.

Another Ahmadiyya congregation was attacked in Bogor, West Java on Wednesday (Feb. 9).

"It seems to me that religious tensions are getting high again in the country," Bela stated.

In the Temanggung rampage in Central Java, a security guard at the Shekina school, Sony Zepulan, told that hijab-wearing women joined men in helmets and turbans in the attacks, damaging several school buildings.

"They poured gasoline and burned it," Zepulan said, according to . "However, the fire was controlled and did not burn the entire building."

The general secretary of Indonesia Bethel Church Synod, the Rev. Ferry Haurisa, told Compass that damage to the school amounted to about 250 million rupiahs (US\$27,750).

"The mobs were damaging and burning down Shekina school, owned by the Indonesian Bethel Church of Temanggung," Haurisa said. "We just pray that God will intervene and forgive this nation."

While damage to the Sts. Peter and Paul church came mainly

from stoning, the Pentecostal church building was reportedly burned along with six motorcycles and three cars parked there. Islamists reportedly pelted the property with Molotov bombs.

The rampaging Islamic extremists reportedly numbered as many as 1,500, with Temanggung Regent Hasyim Affandi asserting that they came from outside the area. Affandi reportedly said he hoped the culprits would be punished.

The chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a U.S. government advisory board, released a statement urging Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to bring the perpetrators of the attacks to swift justice.

“The fact remains that religious tensions will continue as long as militant groups expect the government to enforce one version of orthodoxy, instead of religious freedom for all,” said USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo. “Extremists were rejected at the polls last year, but seek influence by spreading violence and hate.”