

Church under Attack in Indonesia Agrees to Change Venue

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 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.