

Muslim Protestors Surround Worshipers in Bekasi, Indonesia

Around 300 Muslim protestors and 300 police officers surrounded members of the Batak Christian Protestant Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan or HKBP) on Sunday as they worshiped in an open field in Ciketing, Bekasi, local sources said.

"There were many police on guard, but the attackers were able to get very close to the congregation," Theophilus Bela, president of the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum, said in a statement to international government and advocacy groups. "We are afraid that they will attack the church again next Sunday."

He added that a protestor hit the Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak on the cheek.

Police held back the shouting protestors while the church worshipped, but at one point they allowed Murhali Barda, leader of the Front Pembela Islam (FPI or Islamic Defenders Front) in Bekasi, through the cordon for an angry confrontation with church leaders, Voice of America (VOA) reported.

Bekasi police commander Imam Sugianto told VOA that his forces were there to protect "both sides."

The *New York Times* quoted Sugianto as saying that, "If the local people don't give their permission, they can't worship here," but Pastor Simanjuntak said the Bekasi administration had approved the church's decision to meet in the field, according to The Jakarta Globe.

"We demand the Bekasi administration to let the public know that they gave us the green light to conduct our prayers here," Pastor Simanjuntak reportedly said.

The 1,500-strong congregation, established some 15 years ago, initially met in each other's homes before purchasing a residential property in the Pondok Timur housing complex in Bekasi for use as a worship building. The group then met in the building while they waited for local officials to respond to a building permit application filed in 2006.

When Muslim neighbors in December objected to the meetings in the housing complex on the grounds that the church had no permit, officials banned church members from meeting there. As the local government had delayed the processing of its application for a building permit, the church ignored the ban, leading officials to seal the building on June 20.

Bekasi Mayor Mochtar Mohammad on July 9 said he would allow the congregation to meet in public areas or at the city hall, according to the Globe. Pastor Simanjuntak chose to move to the proposed building site, and Sunday meetings at the field in Ciketing were soon greeted by crowds of protestors.

The FPI's Barda said the church's insistence on worshipping at the site was a provocation, according to VOA. He also accused Christians in Bekasi of attempting to convert Muslims away from their religion, citing a recent Internet report claiming that the Mahanaim Foundation, a local Christian charity, had carried out a mass baptism of new converts.

Foundation spokeswoman Marya Irawan, however, told The Jakarta Post that the crowds were not baptized but only invited to Mahanaim leader Henry Sutanto's home as part of an effort to reach out to the poor.

Pastor Simanjuntak's church has now filed a case against the Bekasi administration.

"I fully support any efforts to take this to the courts," a local Christian leader who preferred to remain unnamed told Compass. "We need to respond through legal channels and let the government know that these attacks are a gross human rights violation."

Hard-line Islamic groups held a congress in Bekasi on June 20, and on June 27 announced their united intent to combat the "Christianization" of the region.

Bonar Tigor Naipospos, spokesman for Indonesia's Institute for Peace and Democracy (Setara), told VOA that unsubstantiated rumors about Christians using deceptive practices to convert Muslims have fueled the anger in Bekasi. He reportedly said that Muslims believe that Christians badger people to convert and entice them with money, food or other incentives.

Pastor Simanjuntak has said that she and her church will continue meeting in the field, as they have nowhere else to go.