

Christians Decry Malaysia's Detention of Bible Books

The detaining of 30,000 copies of the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs in the Malay language at Malaysia's Kuching Port has "greatly disillusioned" the nation's Christian community.

The books, imported from Indonesia by the local branch of Gideons International for distribution in schools, churches and longhouses in Betong, Saratok and other Christian areas in Sarawak state, have been detained at the Kuching Port since January.

Authorities told an unnamed officer of the importer on Jan. 12 that he could not distribute the books in Sarawak state, on the island of Borneo, since they "contained words which are also found in the Quran," according to online news agency Malaysiakini. The officer was ordered to transport the books to the Home Ministry's office for storage.

Last week, when the same officer enquired of the Home Ministry officials on the status of the Malay Bibles, authorities said they had yet to receive instructions on the matter.

This is not the first time government authorities have detained Malay-language Bibles, and Bishop Ng Moon Hing, chairman of Christian Federation of Malaysia, decried the action.

"The CFM is greatly disillusioned, fed-up and angered by the repeated detention of Bibles written in our national language," Ng says. "It would appear as if the authorities are waging a continuous, surreptitious and systematic program against Christians in Malaysia to deny them access to the Bible in [Malay]."

An earlier consignment of 5,100 copies of the Good News Bible

in Malay, imported by the Bible Society of Malaysia, was detained in Port Klang in March 2009. Together with this latest seizure, the total number of Bibles seized and remaining in possession of the Home Ministry amounts to 35,100 copies.

The CFM, representing a majority of Christians in Malaysia, released a statement on March 10 asserting, "All attempts to import the Bible in Bahasa Malaysia [Malay], i.e. the Alkitab, whether through Port Klang or the Port of Kuching, have been thwarted" since March 2009.

Prior to March 2009, there had been several such incidents, and "each time, tedious steps had to be taken to secure their release," according to the CFM.

A significant 64 percent of Malaysian Christians are indigenous people from Sabah and Sarawak states who use the Malay language in their daily life. Christian leaders say having Bibles in the Malay language is crucial to the practice of their Christian faith.

Christians make up more than 9 percent of Malaysia's nearly 28 million people, according to Operation World.

This latest Bible book seizure has irked Christians and drawn criticisms from politicians spanning both sides of the political divide.

The Sarawak Ministers Fellowship issued a statement registering its "strong protest," describing the detention of the books as "unconstitutional" and in violation of the 18-point agreement for Sarawak in the formation of Malaysia.

Representing the opposition political party, People's Justice Party (Sarawak Parti Keadilan Rakyat) Chief Baru Bian described the withholding as "religious harassment" and "a blatant disregard of our constitutional right as Christians in Malaysia."

Chua Soi Lek, president of the Malaysian Chinese Association, a political party within the ruling coalition National Front, proposes that Malay Bibles be allowed to be printed locally. The deputy chief minister of Sarawak, Dr. George Chan, expressed the state government's willingness to publish the Malay Bible locally.

Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein was quoted in The Star newspaper today as saying, "The issue is being resolved amicably with the parties concerned," though how this was taking place was not apparent. The home minister has reportedly said the books had been withheld pending an appeal over the use of the word "Allah" in The Herald catholic newspaper.

Secretary-General of Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement Mohamad Raimi Abdul Rahim has called for the government to enforce the ban on use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims nationwide, including in Sabah and Sarawak.

In a controversial court ruling on Dec. 31, 2009, Judge Lau Bee Lan had allowed The Herald to use the word "Allah" for God in the Malay section of its multilingual newspaper. The Home Ministry filed an appeal against the decision on Jan. 4, 2010, but to date there is no indication as to when the case will be heard.