

Government Bows to Muslim Pressure to Close Churches

Authorities in Indonesia's conservative Aceh province said on Sunday several Christian churches would be shut down this week, just days after a mob burned down a church, killing one person and injuring several others.

Tensions have been high among the ethnically and religiously diverse population of Aceh, raising the risk of further religious violence in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim population.

The vast majority of Indonesians practice a moderate form of Islam and Aceh is the only province to adhere to Islamic Sharia law, putting it at odds with the rest of the country.

Aceh was granted special autonomy as part of a 2005 agreement to end decades of separatist violence, which allowed it to implement Sharia law.

Christian groups in Aceh Singkil district, where the churches stand, had been consulted on the matter, authorities said, and members of as many as six churches had agreed to dismantle their houses of worship after admitting they did not have the required building permits.

"All houses of worship, regardless of the religion, need to be in accordance with the laws of Aceh," Bardan Sahidi, a member of the provincial parliament, told Reuters after attending a meeting of political and religious figures, including representatives from the religious affairs ministry in Jakarta.

Local Christian groups were not immediately available for comment.

The move comes after Muslim residents, including members of the hardline group Islamic Defenders Front, demanded that the local government shut down 10 churches, citing a lack of permits.

A mob of hundreds of people burned down a small church in Aceh Singkil district last week, forcing thousands of Christians to flee to neighbouring villages.

One Muslim member of the mob was killed, police said last week, adding that at least 10 people had been detained on suspicion of inciting violence.

The government has since deployed 1,300 police and military personnel to the area, with hundreds more on standby, to patrol the streets and stand guard outside churches that dot the small palm oil plantations in the district.

Christian residents of the run-down village attended a service on Sunday right next to the charred remains of their church, under the guard of about a dozen armed security personnel.

“At the moment, things are calm but we are on standby for any further incidents,” said Saladin, spokesman for Aceh police, adding that evacuees had since returned to their homes. {eo}

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