

Indonesian Churches Wary of Islamist Offer of 'Protection'

In the wake of several attacks on worship services by Indonesia's notorious Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), several Jakarta area church leaders rejected the FPI's offer to help protect them over Christmas.

FPI leader Rizieq Shihab made the offer last week, saying he was working in cooperation with the Indonesian Communion of Churches and the Indonesian Bishops Conference. But several churches publicly rejected the offer, with online forums comparing FPI church protection to "foxes protecting a chicken coop."

Jakarta's police chief on Friday (Dec. 18) promised protection for every "registered" church in the area, The Jakarta Globe reported. Many Indonesian churches are unregistered, however, since they fail to meet the strict conditions of a Joint Ministerial Decree (SKB) governing places of worship.

The Indonesian public has harshly criticized FPI members for their role in multiple church attacks over the past year and faulted police and politicians for failing to intervene.

The most recent attack occurred last Sunday (Dec. 19), when more than 100 Islamists gathered outside the sealed home of the Rev. Badia Hutagalung of Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) church in Rancaekek to disrupt worship services, sources said.

Another attack on Sept. 12 led to the arrest and detention of 13 FPI members, including Murhali Barda, leader of the FPI's Bekasi branch. During the attack, assailants stabbed and critically wounded church elder Hasian Sihombing and beat the

Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak over the head with a wooden beam. (See, "Indonesian Church Leaders Wounded in Attack," Sept. 15.)

"Christians Should Not Provoke Us"

After making the offer of FPI assistance at the Jakarta police headquarters on Dec. 14, Shihab told The Jakarta Post that "Islam is not allowed to disrupt other religions worship," but he added the warning that "Christians should not provoke us."

His offer came just two days after some 300 Islamists from FPI, the Indonesian Ulama Forum and the Islamic Reformist Movement, together with civil service police officers, raided and forcibly closed seven churches in Rancaekek. (See "Islamists Raid House Churches in West Java," Dec. 17.)

Sub-district head Meman Nurjaman on Nov. 16 had sent out a decree ordering 11 churches in Rancaekek to close, citing protests from the local community. Nurjaman later admitted that he had acted under pressure from Muslim hardliners living outside the housing estate, according to a Compass source, who added that Nurjaman had no legal authority to issue the decree.

During the Dec. 12 raid, Islamists forcibly removed at least 100 worshipers from a residential building used by the HKBP Bethania church and several other churches, and they urged the local government to seal the building immediately because it was not a registered place of worship.

Hutagalung said the congregation only worshipped there because they could not meet the terms of the SKB, which requires proof of at least 90 church members, signatures of approval from at least 60 local residents, and approval from village officials and a local interfaith forum.

The mob also attacked six other house churches in Rancaekek on Dec. 12, forcing five of the seven to close.

A day after the raids, Adj. Sr. Comr. Hendro Pandowo, the Bandung police chief, said Christians in Bandung should refrain from putting themselves in harm's way.

"If they pray in churches, I will protect them if anybody disturbs them," he told the The Jakarta Globe. "If they pray in places they are not allowed to, they are breaking rules, so why would I protect them?"

Readers posting comments to the Globe article online said it was almost impossible for congregations to obtain a building permit under existing regulations, leaving them no option but to worship in private homes or empty building sites.

One reader, identified only by the log-in name of Aki-Amani, wrote, "Thank you Chief Hendro for your promise of protection—if we follow your dictates. However, don't be surprised if we are found anywhere, everywhere—praying as we go about our daily activities at home and in the market place, whether you approve and will protect us or not."

Christmas Security

Jakarta police on Friday (Dec. 18) met with leaders representing 1,600 churches in greater Jakarta to discuss security measures for the Christmas season.

Jakarta Police Chief Insp. Gen. Sutarman, identified only by a single name, said at least 9,000 security personnel would be deployed in and around churches in greater Jakarta as part of a total 87,000 security personnel stationed at houses of worship throughout Indonesia over the Christmas and New Year season, the Globe reported.

Police began providing Christmas security for churches after a series of 38 coordinated church bombings on Dec. 24, 2000, left at least 18 people dead and dozens injured across the nation. The bombings were organized by Jemaah Islamiyah, a local Islamic terrorist group.

“The Jakarta police guarantee that celebrations will be conducted peacefully across all churches registered with us in the city,” Sutarman reportedly said.

What that implies for unregistered churches remains to be seen.

Spokesmen from two unregistered churches told the Globe they would meet this Christmas despite explicit threats from the FPI to ransack “controversial” Christmas celebrations.

The congregation of HKBP Filadelfia in Bekasi will meet in a tent on the street next to their sealed church, despite the risk of further aggression or physical harm from the FPI, sources said.

Members of Gereja Kristen Indonesia Yasmin in Bogor, however, reportedly said they will break open the seals on their partially-constructed church, closed in September due to pressure from the FPI and other hard-line groups despite having a legal permit.

“We want to celebrate religious freedom in our church,” spokesman Bona Sigalingging told reporters, adding that police would not be asked to provide security.