

Islamists Cane Elderly Christian Woman 30 Times

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that a 60-year-old Christian woman was tried and publicly caned 30 times for selling alcohol in Aceh, Indonesia's most conservative Islamic region. The decision to try and punish a non-Muslim under the strict traditional guidelines of Sharia law is the first of its kind in the Aceh.

The region of Aceh has held a standing agreement with the secular government since 2001 that the conservative Islamic region be ruled under Sharia law. Under such laws, Muslims are punished for partaking in alcoholic consumption, adultery, gambling, homosexual acts and even being associated with unwed members of the opposite sex. New bylaws were implemented in Aceh's judicial code broadening Sharia's reach to non-Muslims, placing Christians and other religious minorities under its jurisdiction.

"Such things often happen here and we have become used to it," a local pastor reported to ICC. "Being Christian here is not easy, as the Sharia law is applied to everyone, including Christians."

Aceh has had a history of persecution against religious minorities. In October of 2015, Islamic radical groups burned several churches and pressured local authorities to demolish 10 others. Thousands of Christians and other religious minorities have fled Aceh to neighboring provinces hoping to escape persecution. Since 2006, 1,000 churches have been closed in Aceh alone.

"Most of the time we choose to be quiet," the same local pastor lamented. "Quiet when our churches are closed and burned. Quiet when Christians are being persecuted."

Christian churches across Indonesia are constantly being closed or demolished for allegedly failing to obtain the proper building permits. According to reports, even when a church obtains the correct documents they are forcefully closed due to pressure from radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic Forum Community (FUI). Examples include the GKI Yasmin and HKBP Philadelphia churches who lost the use of their facilities in 2010, even after the Indonesian Supreme Court upheld their building permits. They continue to hold services outside of the presidential palace in protest, calling for the government to uphold the court's ruling. Instead they are met with silence and remain without proper facilities.

ICC's Regional Manager for South Asia, William Stark, states, "ICC is deeply disturbed that the governing authority of Aceh would publicly punish an elderly Christian woman under Sharia law. Equally disturbing is that the secular Indonesian government has had an agreement with Aceh since 2001 allowing them to rule under such religious law. By doing so, Indonesia has set up a hierarchy of religions, even though religious freedom is protected under its constitution. Authorities continue to close Christian churches under catch-22 restrictive building and permit laws. All of this begs the question of when the rule of law will be enforced for Christians. We call on the Indonesian government to follow the rule of law and protect religious freedom for all and especially Christians (the minority most targeted). We also call on President Widodo to review Aceh's expansion of Sharia to include non-Muslims which is a direct violation of religious freedom."

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