

Malaysian Gov't Defacing Bibles

Christian importers of Bibles that Malaysian officials detained are balking at conditions the government has imposed for their release, such as defacement of the sacred books with official stamps.

The Home Ministry stamped the words, "This Good News [Malay] Bible is for use by Christians only" on 5,100 Bibles without consulting the importer, the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM), which initially refused to collect them as it had neither accepted nor agreed to the conditions. The Home Ministry applied the stamp a day after the government on March 15 issued a release order for the Bibles, which had been detained in Port Klang, 38 kilometers (24 miles) southwest of Kuala Lumpur, since March 20, 2009.

Another 30,000 Bibles detained since Jan. 12 on the island of Borneo remain in port after the Sarawak state Home Ministry told the local chapter of Gideons International that it could collect them if the organization would put the stamp on them. Gideons has thus far declined to do so, and a spokesman said yesterday (April 5) that officials had already defaced the books with the stamp.

The government issued letters of release to both organizations on March 15 under the condition that the books bear the stamp, "Reminder: This Good News [Malay] Bible is for use by Christians only. By order of the Home Minister," and that the covers must carry a serial number, the official seal of the department and a date.

The Home Ministry's stamping of the BSM Bibles without the organization's permission came under fire from the Christian community. In a statement issued on March 17, Bishop Ng Moon

Hing, chairman of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), described the Home Ministry's action as desecration.

"[The] new conditions imposed on the release of the impounded Bibles is wholly unacceptable to us," he added.

Ng described the conditions imposed by the Home Ministry as tantamount to treating the Malay Bible as a "restricted item" and subjecting the word of God to the control of man. In response, Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein has said the act of stamping and serialization was standard protocol.

In the weeks following the March 15 release order, the government made several attempts to try to appease the Christian community through Idris Jala, a Christian from Sarawak state and a minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Idris issued the government's first statement on March 22, explaining that officials had reduced earlier conditions imposed by the Home Ministry to require only the words, "For Christianity" to be stamped on the covers of the Bible in font type Arial, size 16, in bold.

Idris informed BSM that the Bibles could be collected in their present state or arrangements could be made to have stickers with the words "For Christianity" pasted over the imprint of the stamps made by the Home Ministry officials. In the event that this was not acceptable, the minister pointed out that BSM had the option of having the whole consignment replaced, since the government had received an offer from Christian donors who were prepared to bear the full cost of purchasing new Bibles.

In response, the CFM issued a statement on March 30 saying, "The offer made does address the substantive issues," and called on the government "to remove every impediment, whether legal or administrative, to the importation, publication, distribution and use of the [Malay Bible] and indeed to

protect and defend our right to use the [Malay Bible].”

Ng, however, left it to the two importers to decide whether to collect the Bibles based on their specific circumstances.

On March 31, BSM collected the mishandled Bibles “to prevent the possibility of further acts of desecration or disrespect.” In a press statement, BSM officials explained that the copies cannot be sold but “will be respectfully preserved as museum pieces and as a heritage for the Christian Church in Malaysia.” The organization also made it clear that it will only accept compensation from the Home Ministry and not from “Christian donors,” a term it viewed suspiciously.

On Saturday (April 2), Idris issued a 10-point statement to try to resolve the impasse. Significantly, this latest overture by the government included the lifting of present restrictions to allow for the local printing and importation of Malay and other indigenous-language Bibles into the country.

In Sarawak and Sabah, there would be no conditions attached to Bibles printed locally or imported. There also would be no prohibitions and restrictions on residents of these two states carrying such Bibles to other states. A significant 64 percent of Malaysian Christians are indigenous people from Sabah and Sarawak states who use the Malay language in their daily life, and having the Bible in the Malay language is considered critical to the practice of their Christian faith.

In the case of West Malaysia, however, in view of its larger Muslim population, the government imposed the condition that the Bibles must have the words “Christian publication” and the sign of the cross printed on the front covers.

Most Christians responded to this latest overture with caution. Many remained skeptical, seeing it as a politically motivated move in view of Sarawak state elections on April 16. Nearly half of Sarawak’s population is Christian.

Bolly Lapok, an Anglican priest, told the online news agency Malaysian Insider, "It's an assurance, but we have been given such assurances before." BSM General-Secretary the Rev. Simon Wong reportedly expressed the same sentiments, saying the Home Ministry already has a record of breaking its word.

The Rev. Thomas Phillips of the Mar Thoma Church, who is also president of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism, questioned the timing of the proposal: "Why, after all these years?"

The youth wing of the Council of Churches rejected the proposal outright, expressing fears that the government was trying to "buy them over" for the Sarawak election, and that it would go back on its word after that.

Bishop Paul Tan, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, called the proposal an "insidious tactic of 'divide and rule,'" referring to its different requirements imposed on Malaysians separated by the South China Sea. Dr. Ng Kam Weng, research director at Kairos Research Centre, stressed that the proposal "does not address the root problem of the present crisis, i.e. the Allah issue."

The 10-point proposal has also drawn the ire of Muslim groups, who view it as the government caving in to Christian pressure.

Perak Mufti Harussani Zakaria expressed his disappointment, reportedly saying, "If the government does this, just cancel the law," in reference to various state Islamic enactments that prohibit the use of the word "Allah" and other so-called Islamic terms that led to the banning of the Malay Bible. Malay Bibles have not been allowed to be printed locally for fear that they will utilize "prohibited" words.

The Muslim Organizations in Defense of Islam (Pembela) threatened to challenge the 10-point proposal in court if it was not reviewed in consultation with Muslim representatives.

On the same day Pembela issued its statement, the government seemed to have retracted its earlier commitment. The Home Minister reportedly said talks on the Malay Bibles were still ongoing despite Idris' 10-point proposal, which purportedly represents the Cabinet's decision.

As a result, James Redas Noel of the Gideons said yesterday (April 5) that he was confused by the mixed messages coming from the government and will not make a decision on whether to collect the Bibles until he had consulted church leaders on the matter, according to the Malaysian Insider.

The issue with the Malay Bibles is closely tied to the dispute over use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims.

In a controversial court ruling on Dec. 31, 2009, judge Lau Bee Lan had allowed The Herald, a Catholic newspaper, to use "Allah" for God in the Malay section of its multilingual newspaper.

The Home Ministry filed an appeal against this decision on Jan. 4, 2010. To date, there is no indication as to when the case will be heard.

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