

Mobs Attack Indonesian Churches as Persecution Increases

Last week a mob composed of hundreds of angry Muslims descended on two churches in Indonesia's province of West Sumatra a day after a street march in the same district protested against a perceived increase in Christian schools, according to International Christian Concern (ICC).

The mob was reportedly organized by a radical Islamist political group, the Islamic Organizations Communication Forum, and descended on the Stasi Mahakarya and Gereja Pentakosta Sion Indonesia churches in the district of West Pasaman Tuesday, Nov. 20.

Several participants in the mob threatened to use force to stop Christian church members from continuing planned expansions to their building; however, a large company of police and military personnel prevented the mob from doing any damage.

The incident came only a day after protesters took to the streets of West Pasaman to voice their disapproval of a perceived rise in Christian schools in the area. The protests were reportedly led by leaders of local Islamist groups shouting slogans at churches, Christian schools and Christian-owned businesses. Signs held by protesters during the march called for the closure of Christian shops and cafes and warned Muslims not to send their children to Christian schools.

The two churches surrounded by the mob last week have both applied for legal building permits, an arduous process under Indonesian law. The application, which requires the signed approval of at least 60 non-Muslims, can take years to complete and is often delayed by local government officials.

The Rev. Bernard, one of the churches' pastors, said that Islamic organizations had rejected the permit he applied for three years ago but that he was planning on applying again soon. Lack of a permit is an oft-cited pretext for protests against churches across Indonesia.

West Sumatra is home to the second highest percentage of Muslims in Indonesia after the province of Aceh, which is governed by Shariah law. Last year, at least one Christian leader in the province had his home vandalized and was pressured by extremists to convert to Islam.

Ryan Morgan, ICC's regional manager for Southeast Asia, said, "The Indonesian government can no longer afford to ignore the discrimination and outright aggression that is taking place against the country's religious minorities. This latest incident took place even as members of Indonesia's Shia Muslim community remain homeless after mobs burned down their village in August.

"At least half a dozen churches in the Bekasi-Jakarta area have been forced out of their buildings by angry mobs of extremists just this year alone. How can the Indonesian government claim a tolerant society when it allows religious fanatics to intimidate and even attack religious minorities on a regular basis? Indonesia's Christians, as well as every other religious minority, must be given the freedom to worship and practice their religion in peace."