

Seizure of 15,000 Bibles in Malaysia Stuns Christians

✖ Malaysian port and customs authorities have seized at least 15,000 Bibles in recent months because the word “Allah” for God appears in them.

Some 10,000 of the Bahasa Malaysia-language Bibles, which were printed in Indonesia, are in Kuching, capital of Sarawak in East Malaysia, and another 5,000 copies are in Kelang near Kuala Lumpur.

The Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) on Wednesday called for the immediate release of the confiscated Bibles. At the same time, CFM Executive Secretary Tan Kong Beng told Compass that the federation is striving for amicable relations with government authorities.

“We are open to and desire further discussion with officials so that this problem can be resolved,” the CFM official said.

The CFM officially represents the three major Christian groups in the country: The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia, the Council of Churches of Malaysia and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia.

A strong Christian community in Indonesia, estimated 37 million by Operation World, has long produced large amounts of literature for export to Malaysia. In 2005 the government of Malaysia agreed to allow the use of “Allah” in non-Muslim literature, according to CFM.

“The government and CFM have exchanged letters on this matter previously,” reads the CFM statement, “and we have a written agreement in December 2005 that Bahasa Malaysia Bibles can be distributed so long as the symbol of the cross and the words ‘A Christian publication’ are printed on the front page.”

With the exception of the temporary suspension of publication of the Roman Catholic *Herald* newspaper in 2007 and the ongoing court battle over the weekly's use of "Allah," few problems were encountered in the policy. This past March, however, authorities suddenly began seizing CDs, Sunday school materials and Bibles containing the word "Allah."

Church leaders were stunned that no one had informed them of a change in policy. Quiet negotiations failed to resolve the situation, and several lawsuits began working their way through the court system. These suits challenge the right of the Minister of Home Affairs to restrict the use of "Allah" and to limit freedom of religion.

"To withhold the use of the Bahasa Malaysia Bibles is an infringement of Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, which gives every Malaysian the right to profess his/her faith as well as to practice it," according to the CFM.

A government official in Malaysia was unavailable for comment. Officially, the government says only that use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims could create "confusion" among Muslims.

The Kuala Lumpur High Court in Malaysia was scheduled to determine the legality of the word "Allah" in non-Muslim literature on July 7 but postponed the decision. The newspaper had been allowed to use the term until a final court decision was to be handed down, but the Kuala Lumpur High Court on May 30 overturned that brief reprieve.

The Rev. Lawrence Andrew, editor of the *Herald*, has cited examples from Malay dictionaries going back to the 17th century that use "Allah" as the vernacular translation for God. He has also noted that "Allah" is an Arabic term derived from the same roots as the Hebrew *Elohim*, and that the word pre-dates Muhammad, Islam's prophet.

The *Herald* has a circulation of 13,000 and an estimated readership of 50,000. The newspaper is sold in Catholic

churches and is not available from newsstands.

While the issue is tied up in the courts, many are hoping for a more harmonious solution to the problem. Both Indonesia and Malaysia use variations of Malay as their national languages, and all translations of the Bible in both countries used "Allah" for God until Malaysian authorities decided in the past few years that it was an Islamic term that should be used only by Muslims. In so doing, Malaysia effectively shut off the importation of Christian literature from Indonesia.

Malaysia's population is about 60 percent Muslim, 19 percent Buddhist and 9 percent Christian. About 6 percent are Hindu, with 2.6 percent of the population adhering to Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions.