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Anti-Christian violence in Indonesia especially alarming

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 8, 2011 NCR Today

Three Christian churches, as well as a church-run orphanage and health center, were attacked today in the Java region of Indonesia, in the latest outbreak of anti-Christian violence by Muslim radicals. According to media reports, a Catholic priest was beaten as he tried to defend the tabernacle and the Eucharist against a mob.

Two of the churches were reportedly burned, and a third ransacked. The attacks were eventually turned back by local police in riot gear, though only after a police van was also set ablaze.

tThe attacks are especially alarming given that in global debates over religious freedom, Indonesia, the world?s most populous Muslim nation, is typically held up as an example of tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

tThe main target of the attack was apparently a Pentecostal church in Java, but the radicals went on to attack Catholic churches in addition to an orphanage and health center run by the Sisters of Providence. The Catholic parish of St Peter and Paul in Temanggung was where the local pastor, a Holy Family missionary, was reportedly beaten.

tThat, too, is worrying, as it confirms that incensed radicals often lump all Christians together whenever they perceive a provocation or insult.

Today's violence in Indonesia forms part of what many experts regard as a rising tide of violence directed at Christian minorities in various parts of the world. According to the German-based relief agency "Aid to the Church in Need," 75 percent of all acts of religious intolerance are today directed against Christians.

tThe triggering incident for today's rampage was reportedly the trial of an Indonesian Protestant, Richmond Bawengan Antonius, arrested in October 2010 over charges of distributing missionary tracts insulting to Islam.

According to media reports, the leaflets and books described the Black Stone, or *al-Hajaru-l-Aswad*, on the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque in Mecca as looking like a woman?s genitals. The material also reportedly described the *jamarat* ? three stone pillars in the city of Mina just east of Mecca at which worshippers throw stones during the Haj ? as looking like a man?s genitals.

tBawengan was sentenced by the local court to five years imprisonment, the maximum penalty under Indonesian law. Protestors, however, demanded that Bawengan either be executed or turned over to them.

tLocal sources said the crowd was chanting ?kill, kill? and ?burn, burn? as it stormed the churches and other Christian structures.

The anti-Christian violence in today comes just days after a mob in another part of Java attacked a gathering of the Ahmadiyah Muslim sect, killing three and injuring several others. Considered apostates by mainstream Muslims, the Ahmadiyahs are barred by a 2008 law from proselytism in Indonesia.

Followers of the Ahmadiyah movement believe their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and not Mohammed, was the final prophet of Islam.

A video of Sunday's attack shows hundreds of Muslim radicals armed with machetes, sticks and rocks screaming ?Allahu Akbar? (God is Greatest) as they set upon their victims.

Indonesia has a population of 240 million, roughly 85 percent of which is Muslim. The seven million Catholics in Indonesia represent roughly 3 percent of the national population, with another 6 percent being Protestant.

Human rights groups such as Amnesty International say intolerance is on the rise in the country. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an autonomous board that advises the American government, has called for a review of regulations seen as persecuting minorities, such as a 1965 blasphemy law.

In the decade since the 9/11 terrorist attacks first unleashed fears of a global "clash of civilizations" between the West and Islam, many experts have pointed to Indonesia as a source of positive energies in the Islamic world.

For instance, Nurcholish Madjid, an Indonesian Muslim intellectual who died in 2005, made a career out of insisting that for Islam to be victorious in the global struggle of ideas, it needs to embrace tolerance, democracy and pluralism.

Indonesian Islam is known for various reform movements. A growing number of young university students and affluent housewives, for example, are attracted to Sufi prayer services, especially Thursday night gatherings when followers chant the 99 names of God. Since music in worship is frowned upon in Sunni Islam, such forms of devotion are often experienced as liberating.

Today's violence, however, confirms that even in a society where tolerance and pluralism are seen as national virtues, radicalism can erupt under the right conditions.

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