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INDONESIA NGOs welcome EU-Indonesia human rights dialogue and call for priority focus on religious freedom



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Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and three Indonesia-based civil society organizations, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, the Wahid Institute and the Human Rights Working Group, have joined together to welcome the establishment of a human rights dialogue between the European Union (EU) and Indonesia, starting on 29 June.

The four organizations applauded Indonesia's willingness to engage in the process, and urged the EU and Indonesia to make religious freedom a priority focus during the process, in light of recent violent attacks on Christians and other religious, abuses resulting from the 1965 Religious Defamation Law, and the rise of Islamist extremism in the country.

A CSW team returned this week from a two-week fact-finding visit to Indonesia, during which they met representatives of Protestant and Catholic churches, inter-faith dialogue groups and Muslim civil society groups working for religious freedom and pluralism.

Over 200 violations of religious freedom were recorded by the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace during 2009. Violence and discrimination against Christians has increased, with at least 30 attacks on churches and church property occurring between January 2009 and May 2010, and several attempts to revoke the licenses from churches. At least 20 incidents have been reported this year alone, according to the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum (JCCF). A church in Bogor is currently facing serious threats, as is the Batak Protestant Church in Bekasi, where a Catholic school was attacked on 8 May.

The plight of the Muslim Ahmadiya sect is also a cause for concern. The Ahmadiyahs have faced serious violence and discrimination throughout Indonesia, particularly since the government banned them from propagating their beliefs in a joint ministerial decree in 2008.

The EU-Indonesia human rights dialogue should also address abuses of the 1965 Religious Defamation Law, and explore ways in which the Indonesian government could amend the legislation. In April, the Constitutional Court rejected the case for repeal of the law submitted by seven Indonesian human rights organizations and four prominent Islamic scholars.

CSW's National Director Stuart Windsor said: "CSW is delighted to join together with three very respected Indonesian civil society groups who are working so hard for religious freedom, pluralism and human rights. We applaud Indonesia's long tradition of religious pluralism and freedom, but we are deeply concerned that intolerance and extremism are gaining ground and that religious freedom is under threat.

"We urge both the EU and the Indonesian government to address concerns about religious freedom and to seek ways to protect pluralism, as enshrined in the country's guiding philosophy of 'Pancasila', and to combat religious intolerance, extremism, hatred and violence. We call on the EU to proactively support inter-faith dialogue initiatives in Indonesia, as well as counter-extremism projects, in order to promote religious pluralism, freedom and tolerance. We urge the Indonesian authorities to seek ways to create a climate more conducive to pluralism, by revising or repealing intolerant legislation and providing proactive support to protect religious minorities from attacks."

For further information on the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, visit www.setara-institute.org

The WAHID Institute seeks to develop moderate Islamic thought to promote democratic reform, religious pluralism, multiculturalism and tolerance amongst Muslims both in Indonesia and around the world. For further information, visit www.wahidinstitute.org

HRWG, Indonesia's NGO Coalition for International Human Rights Advocacy, was established to direct both international support and pressure to the Indonesian government to carry out its international and constitutional human rights obligations. For further information, visit www.hrwg.org.

Notes to Editors:

1. The church in Bogor is holding services in the street as the church building has been forcibly closed. Worshippers had obtained permission to construct the building, including a decree from the local Mayor, in 2006, but local authorities were pressured by extremist organisations and the permit was suspended. On 27 April, several buildings in Bogor believed to be intended for church use were burned down.
2. In Bekasi, church services have been held in the street for the past six months, after local authorities revoked the license and extremists conducted a campaign of intimidation. On 18 June, another Batak Protestant Church in Pondok Timur, Bekasi, was officially closed down by the local authorities. On 20 June, three churches in Tembilahan, in Riau province, received threats, although they had licenses.