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INDONESIA CSW urges Indonesia to protect religious freedom and pluralism amid increasing attacks on minorities

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today called on the Indonesian Government to protect its long tradition of religious freedom and pluralism, enshrined in the State philosophy known as the 'Pancasila', following increasing attacks on Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims in the country.

Concerns over escalating threats to religious freedom in Indonesia were highlighted on 19 September in a statement by the Forum of Religious Freedom Solidarity, an Indonesian coalition of religious and human rights organizations. The coalition held a peace march to the State Palace to deliver a letter to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono calling on the government to protect religious minorities and defend religious freedom.

Churches in Indonesia, particularly West Java, are facing an increasing campaign of intimidation and harassment by extremist Islamist groups. On 12 September, an elder of the Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP) in Bekasi, West Java, was stabbed in his heart and stomach on his way to a service, and the Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak was beaten on her head, face and back with a wooden block. In August, several hundred members of the Islamic People's Forum and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) assaulted members of the congregation who were worshipping in the open air after their church building had been forced to close. According to the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, at least 30 attacks on churches have been reported so far this year.

In July, extremist Islamists attacked members of the Ahmadiyya community, and earlier this month the Minister for Religious Affairs, Suryadharma Ali, caused outrage among human rights groups when he proposed to ban the Ahmadiyyas completely. The Ahmadiyyas, a Muslim sect, already face severe restrictions and discrimination under a joint ministerial decree issued by the Indonesian government in 2008.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW-UK, said: "Indonesia has a proud tradition of religious pluralism, freedom and harmony, and could be an example to the world of a Muslim-majority nation which promotes these values. This tradition is under threat, however, as a result of growing Islamist extremism, and we urge the Indonesian authorities to do all they can to protect religious minorities, promote religious freedom, and bring the perpetrators of violence to justice. Extremism and hatred must not be allowed to hijack Indonesia's transition to democracy and violence and discrimination cannot be allowed to grow with impunity."