



5.21.2012

INDONESIA CSW visits jailed atheist and persecuted religious minorities

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) visited an Indonesian atheist in prison for his beliefs on May 18, as part of a ten-day fact-finding visit to investigate violations of freedom of religion or belief in the country ahead of the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Indonesia on May 23.

CSW travelled to Sijunjung prison, 130km from Padang, West Sumatra, to visit Alex Aan, a 30 year-old former civil servant who declared his atheism on Facebook. He has been charged under the country's blasphemy laws, and has already spent over four months in prison while awaiting sentencing.

Although Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, protects six major religions in the state ideology, the 'Pancasila', it also requires Indonesians to adhere to a religion. The six approved religions are Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, while followers of other beliefs, and those who consider themselves atheists, are provided no legal recognition and are particularly vulnerable to abuses under the blasphemy laws.

CSW also visited several Christian churches in West Java currently facing harassment, intimidation and restrictions. On May 13, CSW joined HKBP Filadelfia Church in Bekasi, just outside Jakarta, for a Sunday service, but found the road blocked by a large crowd of local Muslims, stirred up by radical Islamist groups, and some police. The radical Islamists shouted increasingly aggressive slogans urging the Christians to leave. Tension grew and, according to some observers, came close to violence.

The church has been facing such harassment and restrictions for several years since it was forced to close, despite having permission from a local court to open. Until recently the congregation held Sunday services in the street outside the church building, but since March 25 radical Islamists have blocked the street every week to prevent the congregation worshipping.

In Aceh Province, meanwhile, following the election last month of Zaini Abdullah, a hard-line Islamic governor, 17 churches in the area were sealed. Of the 17 churches closed, 11 belong to the Protestant Christian Church of Pakpak Dairi, or GKPPD.

CSW also met representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, who have experienced some of the worst religious persecution in Indonesia, as well as local human rights organizations, media and foreign diplomats, all of whom expressed deep concern about rising religious intolerance in Indonesia. Earlier this month, a concert by the singer Lady Gaga was cancelled due to threats from extremist Islamists, and a lecture by a liberal Canadian Muslim, Irshad Manji, was attacked.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is deeply concerned by rising religious intolerance in Indonesia, which is affecting people of all faiths and none from all parts of society, including the majority of Indonesian Muslims who still hold to Indonesia's tradition of religious freedom, pluralism and harmony. Freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right for all people everywhere, and it includes the right not to believe. The current situation is a direct result of the failure of the President and the government of Indonesia to stand up to the radical Islamists and tackle their hateful ideology. We urge the President and the government to take

action to protect the right of all Indonesian citizens to choose, change and practice their beliefs in peace and freedom. We hope that these concerns will be raised clearly and prominently during Indonesia's Universal Periodic Review at the UN later this week, and we urge UN Member States to deliver some clear messages to Indonesia, that its proud tradition of moderate Islam and pluralism is increasingly under threat and action must be taken to prevent further radicalization of the country."

Notes to Editors:

1. Compass reports that Islamists have demanded the demolition of the church buildings in Aceh province. Their demands reference a 2001 agreement that Christians were reportedly forced to sign stipulating that there be only one church and four chapels in the regency. However, there were now 22 churches in the regency.