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INDONESIA | Church closures and jailed atheist show rising religious intolerance

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned at the recent further deterioration in respect for religious freedom in Indonesia, illustrated by the sentencing on June 15 of Indonesian atheist Alexander An to two and a half years in prison for blasphemy and publicly declaring himself an atheist, the reported closure of at least 20 churches in Aceh and the continuing intimidation and restrictions on churches such as HKBP Filadelfia in Bekasi, West Java.

Alexander An, a 30 year-old former civil servant, allegedly posted statements and pictures on Facebook as a member of the Minang atheist Facebook group, which some people construed as insulting Islam and the prophet Mohammed.

On January 20 he was charged with “disseminating information aimed at inciting religious hatred or hostility” under Article 28 (2) of the Electronic Information and Transaction (ITE) Law, religious blasphemy under Article 156a(a) of the Indonesian Criminal Code and calling for others to embrace atheism under Article 156a(b) of the same code. At the conclusion of the trial yesterday he was sentenced to two and a half years’ imprisonment and a fine of 100 million rupiah (the equivalent of US\$11,000) for violating the ITE Law.

The Jakarta Post reports that prosecutors have filed an appeal because they believe Alexander An’s sentence to be too lenient. They had initially argued for a three and a half year sentence and no fine. Mr. An’s lawyers will also be filing an appeal.

CSW visited Mr. An in prison on May 18 as part of a ten-day fact-finding visit to investigate violations of freedom of religion or belief in Indonesia.

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 is also very concerned by reports of the closure and threatened demolition of at least 20 churches in Aceh. Several churches in West Java are also currently facing harassment, intimidation and restrictions, particularly the HKBP Filadelfia church in Bekasi, which CSW visited last month.

CSW’s Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “The closure of so many churches in Aceh, continued attacks on churches in West Java, the persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and now the sentencing of Alexander An all illustrate the rising religious intolerance in Indonesia, which CSW has been documenting and reporting for several years. As an organization working for freedom of religion or belief, as set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we are deeply concerned about all these cases. Freedom of religion or belief must be protected, and must include the right not to believe. Restrictions on such freedoms constitute a violation of human rights and are a cause for serious concern about the direction in which Indonesia is heading. We urge the Indonesian authorities to review the laws under which churches are being forcibly closed, even when they are legally registered, the laws under which Alexander An has been charged and convicted, consider

ways to reform or repeal legislation and uphold the rule of law so that freedom of conscience, expression and religion are protected for all Indonesian citizens. We call for the decision to close churches in Aceh to be revoked, and for Mr. An's case to be reviewed upon appeal and for Mr An to be released.”