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INDONESIA | Atheist Released From Prison

Indonesian atheist Alexander Aan, who was sentenced to 2 ½ years' imprisonment on June 15, 2012 under the nation's blasphemy laws for publicly declaring himself an atheist on Facebook, was released from prison on Jan. 27.

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

On Jan. 20, 2012 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 his trial on June 15, 2012, he was sentenced to 2 ½ years' imprisonment and a fine of 100 million rupiah (the equivalent of \$11,000) for violating the ITE Law.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) visited Aan in prison twice, first in May 2012 prior to his sentencing, and again in June 2013, as part of fact-finding visit to investigate violations of freedom of religion or belief and threats to religious harmony in Indonesia, and has advocated for his release. CSW's landmark report, *Indonesia: Pluralism in Peril – The rise of religious intolerance across the archipelago*, will be launched next month.

Although Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, has a tradition of religious harmony and pluralism enshrined in its state ideology, 'Pancasila', it only officially recognizes six major religions and requires Indonesians to adhere to a religion. The six approved religions are Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, while followers of other religions, and atheists, are provided no legal recognition and are particularly vulnerable to abuses under the blasphemy laws.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers, who visited Aan in prison and is the author of the forthcoming report, said, "We are delighted that Alexander has been released, before the completion of his sentence, and hope that he will now be free to continue his life without threat or harassment. We urge Indonesia to look very seriously at the blasphemy laws and other legislation which violates freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. We hope that Indonesia will protect, promote and expand the principles of religious pluralism set out in 'Pancasila' so that they apply equally to all Indonesians, and ensure that no one is unjustly imprisoned for their beliefs in the future."