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## INDONESIA | UN Experts Call for Ahok's Release

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the statement by United Nations human rights experts urging the Indonesian government to review and repeal its blasphemy laws, and calling for the immediate release from prison of the former Jakarta governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as "Ahok." He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on blasphemy charges earlier this month.

In a statement May 22, the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression and the Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order, described blasphemy laws as "an unlawful restriction on freedom of expression" which "disproportionately target persons belonging to religious minorities, traditional religions, non-believers and political dissidents."

The three experts described the imprisonment of Ahok as "disappointing" and as a step that will "undermine freedom of religion or belief and freedom of speech in Indonesia." Blasphemy laws, they argued, are incompatible with a democratic society and harmful to religious pluralism. Ahok's case "illustrates that the existence of blasphemy law can be used to justify intolerance and hate speech." Instead of speaking out against hate speech and violent protests against Ahok, the UN experts said, "the Indonesian authorities appear to have appeased incitement to religious intolerance and discrimination."

On May 23, Ahok's wife, Veronica Tan, read a hand-written letter from Ahok at a press conference in Jakarta, in which he announced his decision to abandon his appeal against the conviction and sentence, "for the sake of the nation." His family and close associates have reportedly received threats of violence, including his sister and lawyer, Fifi Lety Indra, who was also warned that she could be prosecuted for blasphemy if Ahok appeals his sentence. Ahok himself has also received a death threat.

An ethnic Chinese and a Christian, Ahok was Jakarta's first non-Muslim governor in over 50 years. He lost his re-election campaign last month after being charged with blasphemy for quoting a Qu'ranic verse during the campaign. He had been addressing concerns that his political opponents may use the verse to discourage people from voting for him as a non-Muslim but was then falsely accused of criticizing the verse itself. The court case against the governor was filed by several conservative Islamic groups after his statement went viral via a doctored YouTube video.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers, who has returned from a visit to Indonesia this week, said, "We welcome the UN experts' strong statement and urge the Indonesian authorities to take these concerns very seriously. The threats and intimidation against Ahok's family and friends must stop immediately, and appropriate action must be taken to ensure their security and to bring to justice those who seek to threaten them. Despite Ahok's own decision to drop his appeal, for fear of further violent protests and threats to his family, we call on the Indonesian authorities to ensure that true justice is done and that Ahok's case is reconsidered, particularly in light of the prosecutors' decision to call for a non-custodial sentence. Ahok is innocent and should be acquitted – the verdict and sentence imposed represent a grotesque miscarriage of justice. Furthermore, we urge the Government of Indonesia to repeal the blasphemy laws, which are so widely open to abuse."