

Project: Open Book Indonesia

Forced Conversions, Circumcision in Moluccas

January 19, 2001

Conflict in the Moluccas is set to enter a third year with no end to the violence in sight. Disturbing new reports suggest Christian communities are facing forcible conversion and circumcision, adding a new dimension to a conflict that has already caused untold suffering. By conservative estimates at least 5000 have been killed and a further 500,000 displaced. Whilst the majority of Moluccans wish to see the conflict resolved, Islamist extremists and elements in the government and armed forces are widely believed to be behind the continuing violence.

FORCED CONVERSIONS

In a disturbing new development, hundreds of Christian families are being forced to convert to Islam or face death. Entire Christian villages are currently held captive by militants in East Seram, Keswui and Teor Islands facing the daily threat of violence.

A disturbing pattern is emerging. Christian villagers receive an ultimatum to convert to Islam or face being killed. The Christians are told that they will be safe as long as they convert to Islam. Men are often separated from their families and kept under guard, whilst women and children are taken in by local Muslims. On a number of occasions, they have been taken to the local mosque, given 'religious training', and forced to adopt a Muslim name. Muslim militants have also targeted survivors of previous attacks who were hiding in the jungle.

CIRCUMCISION OF NEW CONVERTS

Eyewitness reports tell of men and children forcibly circumcised without painkillers and using dirty instruments. Refugees from Keswui report that many of the Christians there were circumcised with the same razor blade causing heavy bleeding. The Christians were then told to wash in the sea to disinfect their wounds.

Particularly disquieting are reports of women forced to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM), a barbaric practice that has been condemned worldwide.

According to the Crisis Centre Diocese of Amboina, a human rights information centre, many of the circumcised Christians need urgent medical attention. As many as 473, out of a total of 692 Catholics in Keswui, have been forced to convert to Islam. The fate of the remaining 219 Catholics is unknown.

The information CSW has received suggests that the predominantly Protestant Christian population of Seram is the current target of the Jihad militants.



Whilst the Indonesian government has acknowledged these forced conversions and has sent investigation teams to Keswui and Teor, it has yet to take sufficient measures to successfully evacuate the Christian captives.

In the meantime, hundreds of Christians and their families are being forced to deny their faith and are being held against their will, facing the threat of violence.

LASKAR JIHAD (Jihad Force)

Laskar Jihad, claiming over 10,000 members, has sent thousands of jihad 'warriors' into the Moluccas. According to Government officials, up to 2000 members of this Muslim militant group still remain in the Moluccas. Despite repeated government statements that these militants will not be allowed access to the islands, members appear to be able to travel freely into the area and act with impunity. Over 400 Jihad warriors arrived in the Moluccas on November 11 alone.

Of particular concern is the freedom with which the leader of the Jihad force, Abdul Jaffar Umar Thalib, is able to travel to and from the Moluccas. His inflammatory speech at a mosque in Ambon during his September visit re-ignited the violence after a slight lull in August. Laskar Jihad has threatened to bring the violence to the streets of Jakarta should the government take action to curtail its activities.

Evidence suggests that Laskar Jihad receives assistance from elements in the government and the armed forces as well as from international Islamist movements.

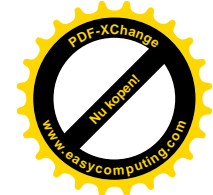
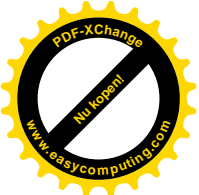
RECOMMENDATIONS

Stuart Windsor, National Director of CSW, spoke of his concern for those caught up in the violence. "Our thoughts and prayers are with all those suffering, whether through the loss of a loved one or the confusion and pain of displacement. It is imperative that the international community acts decisively and compassionately to help bring this conflict and suffering to an end. Whilst the Indonesian government has tried to resolve the conflict peacefully, it is clearly evident that peace and reconciliation efforts have little chance of success unless the members of the militant organisation, Laskar Jihad, and other outside provocateurs, are removed from the area".

CSW is calling for Western governments to provide assistance for the immediate evacuation to safety of those threatened with forced conversion.

CSW also calls on the Western government to urge the Indonesian Government to allow for international assistance in the Moluccas; and to facilitate the sending of human rights monitors to the area as a matter of urgency.

A representative of the Moluccan Christian community in the UK concurs stating: "After 2 years of fighting, despite mediation and reconciliation efforts, surely there is a role now for the international community to step



in and assist the Indonesian government to maintain peace in Moluccas and to investigate the large-scale human rights violations being committed there."

For further information, photos, video footage and a campaign sheet, please contact CSW offices on tel. +44 208 942 8810/fax. +44 208 942 8821.

Source: CSW sources, Masariku Network, Crisis Centre Diocese of Amboina

CASE STUDIES

1. EAST SERAM

The following Christian villages have been forced to convert to Islam according to a Siwalima newspaper:

East Seram - near Bula town (north coast)
Salas Village, Bolan Village, Bonfia Village, Dalan Village

Several other villages are believed to be at risk of forced conversions.

Evacuation of refugees from Hatu and Hatumete villages
CSW highlighted the plight of some 700 Christians living in Hatu and Hatumete who received an ultimatum to convert to Islam by November 31.

The refugees from Hatumete, Salamahu and Ursina villages were all sheltering in Hatu and were in danger of attack by the Muslim militants.

They were evacuated to safety by Masariku Network, an Indonesian human rights organisation, before the 'deadline' run out. However, the refugees are in urgent need of food, shelter and medicines.

Many of the Hatu villagers, however, have decided to remain behind to defend their village.

CSW assisted financially with some of the evacuations.
(Note: Photos and video-footage available)

2. KESWUI ISLAND (also known as Kasui and Kesui island)

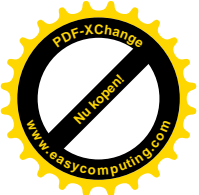
Location: Between South-Eastern tip of Seram (Ceram) island and Kei Island

Hitherto untouched by the conflict, the predominantly Catholic Christian population of Keswui Island was unexpectedly attacked by Muslim militants from the surrounding islands of Geser and Gorong leaving at least 9 people dead and several villages destroyed.

Utta village: Attacked November 23, Karlomin village: Attacked November 24
Wunin village: Attacked November 26, Tanasoa village: Attacked November 26.

Survivors fled to the jungle. There they received an ultimatum to convert to Islam or be killed.

Three evacuation attempts have been made so far but these have been largely



unsuccessful due to inadequate security in the face of threatened attacks by Muslim militants. Women and children were kept in the villages as hostages to ensure that the men taken on board the evacuation ship would declare that they had converted voluntarily and did not wish to be evacuated.

3. TEOR ISLAND

Location: Next to Keswui island

There are six predominantly Catholic Christian villages on Teor. Many of the Christians fled to Kei Islands after the attacks in Keswui.

According to Crisis Centre out of the 841 Catholics in Teor, 142 have been forced to convert to Islam. Some 300 Christians managed to escape to Kei. A further 400 Christians are still in Teor.

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