

Authorities order demolition of 20 churches in Indonesian province

Country/Region: Indonesia, South and East Asia

The authorities have ordered 20 churches in an Indonesian district to tear down their buildings; this follows the closure of 16 smaller Christian places of worship in the same district last month.

Razali Abdul Rahman, the acting regent of Aceh Singkil in the semi-autonomous province of Aceh, ordered the church closures in a letter signed on 30 April, setting a deadline of 8 June for demolition.

Veryanto Sitohang of human rights group the United North Sumatra Alliance said on Tuesday 12 June:

The local administration says that if the church members refuse to comply, the administration itself will demolish the buildings. The deadline for the demolition was June 8. It has been a few days since the deadline, but nothing has happened so far.



A map showing the location of Indonesia

The order was issued on the same day that hard line Islamist groups including the Islam Defenders Front (FPI) staged a protest in front of his office against Christian places of worship in Aceh Singkil.

The authorities also sealed off 16 *undang-undang*, which are small buildings not officially classified as churches, in the district in the week after the protest, though Mr Razali claimed that his administration had acted independently of the groups' demands. *Undang-undang* are distinct from churches in that they are non-denominational and have no cross.

The FPI alleged that the number of churches and *undang-undang* violated agreements signed in 1979 and 2001 by Muslim and Christian leaders. These stated that Christians were allowed only one church and four *undang-undang* in the regency.

Erde Barutu, minister of one of the threatened churches, the Pakpak Dairi Christian Protestant Church, said that church officials had only signed the documents because they were under threat. He added that the number of Christians living in Aceh Singkil had increased significantly since 1979, and was now more than 15,000. The closures would leave only two churches in the district.

The congregations of most of the 20 buildings threatened with demolition are continuing to hold services inside their sealed off buildings with some members standing guard outside.

Church officials have written to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, government departments and the police to protest against the closures.

Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi said that he was not aware of the closure plans and would contact Mr Razali to ask for clarification, saying that citizens had a right to worship as long as they complied with regulations.

He said:

The majority shouldn't force their views on the minority. Tolerance should continue to exist.

Elements of sharia are enforced by special religious police in Aceh, which gained a measure of autonomy from the national government in 2001 following a prolonged Islamist insurgency.