

## **Churches Attacked and Closed while Legislative Threat Gathers Momentum**

Country/Region: INDONESIA

While physical attacks against Christians and churches continue, Islamists are increasingly turning their attention to legal means of oppressing Indonesian Christians.

### **CHURCH ATTACKS AND CLOSURES**

Since November 2003 there has been a spate of church attacks and closures in Java and Sumatra. On Sunday 25 January seven churches were closed down in one day in Banten Province to the west of Jakarta. Two hundred protesters gathered in the town of Tangerang and fiercely clamoured for the churches' closure. Though some of the church doors were sealed up and daubed with graffiti, there was no significant damage done to the buildings.

On 9 January a hundred protesters descended upon the Gereja Protestan Indonesia Church. They forcibly stopped renovation work on the building, in Bulak Kapal, just to the east of Jakarta, and then proceeded to destroy much of the church's furniture and fittings. The congregation had used the building as a church since 1975, but now they have to meet in a large tent. Three days before this attack a bomb was discovered and made safe in a church in Medan, North Sumatra. Before that, on 31 December and 4 January, two more churches were forced to close in East Java, near Surabaya. One of the pastors received death threats and his congregation were badly traumatised.

Four further churches were closed in Jakarta itself between 27 November and 8 December. In one incident on 30 November, protesters came bearing jerry cans full of petrol to burn down the Bethel Church, in Pahlawan Revolusi, if the congregation did not comply. Protesters calling for the closure of these Jakarta churches have been citing "Letter of Decision no. 137"; this 2002 ruling states that churches in West Jakarta can be closed down if the local community objects to them. Recently extremists have been starting to mobilise local Muslims to exploit this ruling. Several churches under construction have also been blocked.

### **RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE BILL**

There is, however, some debate as to the legality of "Letter of Decision no. 137". Nevertheless such decrees could have the weight of the law behind them in the future under the currently hotly debated Religious Tolerance Bill. This legislation may well have a profoundly detrimental affect on the Indonesian Church if it is passed. In its current form it would restrict church building and conversions from one faith to another.

### **ANTI-CHRISTIAN BOMBINGS**

The Religious Tolerance Bill is the latest example of Islamic hardliners increasingly making use of legislation to guide Indonesia towards becoming an Islamic State that will codify repression of religious minorities. However, as the bomb discovery in Medan on 6 January shows, Islamists are not giving up their armed struggle in favour of a purely political one. The discovery of 13 homemade bombs in Poso, Central Sulawesi, at the end of February serves to underline this point. Thankfully the Indonesian judicial system is bringing more armed Muslim extremists to justice. Nur Misuari, alias Nurdin, was found guilty on 19 February of being involved in the 22 July 2001 bombing of a church in East Jakarta. One person died and 67 were injured in this blast, some losing their sight and hearing. Nurdin was sentenced to 12 years; both the prosecution and the defence are appealing.

Please Pray:

1. Pray that the injustice of these church closures will become widely known and the Indonesian government will be forced to address the issue.
2. Praise God that the Indonesian justice system was able to bring Nur Misuari to justice. Pray that the judicial system will become an even more effective tool for dispensing justice to terrorists in Indonesia.