

## Christians “main target” of extremists in Indonesia

Country/Region: Indonesia, South and East Asia

“Christians are the main target” of what has been described as the worst religious extremism in Indonesia in decades, according to new research.

The World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission's (WEA-RLC) report, "Why Religious Violence has Grown in Indonesia", comes just over a week after two churches were set ablaze and another was attacked in a large-scale Muslim riot in Central Java.

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WEA-RLC



President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono  
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The report, released on 18 February, cites at least 75 incidents involving violations of religious freedom against the Christian community in 2010, as well as 50 against the small Islamic Ahmadiyya sect.

It says that Indonesia's liberal Muslims are calling it "the worst manifestation of religious extremism in decades" and the country's President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, is "losing people's confidence" over his handling of the issue.

### Police, media and political complicity

The report criticises Indonesian police, media and politicians for their inaction. It quotes the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace's findings that the police were either directly responsible for or condoned at least 56 incidents of violations of religious freedom last year. And there is said to be a "culture of impunity in cases of violent attacks", with which the courts

are complicit.

It says local Christians complain that churches are attacked almost every week but such incidents are not being reported by the "sensitive" media.

Meanwhile politicians seem to be in denial. Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali recently told the media that "there were no religious conflicts during 2010" while the report says that President Yudhoyono does not want to take a political risk by dealing with rioters strictly.

### Islamist lobbying

As well as outright attacks on minorities and their institutions by extremist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front, the report highlights the more subtle "lobbying" tactic being used by the likes of the Islamic People's Forum (FUI), which is broadening its influence among Muslim clerics and law-makers.

FUI head Muhammad Al Khaththath became a board member of a key body of Islamic jurisprudence, the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI), in 2005. MUI, which has the unofficial backing of the president, issues edicts that restrict the activities of religious minorities. In 2006, ministers passed a decree on the construction of places of worship that makes it extremely difficult for Christians to get permission for church buildings, following MUI edicts.

The WEA-RLC calls on the authorities to take preventative action regarding public order disturbances and incitement to violence or hate speeches, and criticises the government's inaction. It says: "The President needs to realise that his non-confrontational approach towards the extremists is only disrupting peace instead of establishing it. The government, if it has the will, can curb the alarming growth of extremism so that Indonesia stays on the path to democracy and pluralism."