Indonesia: religious violence flares again in Central Sulawesi

John Roberts
7 January 2002

Despite a peace deal signed on December 20 between Christian and Muslim leaders in the Indonesian province of Central Sulawesi, sectarian violence is continuing. On January 1, four bombs exploded outside four churches in the provincial capital of Palu, wounding at least one person.

More than 1,000 people have died since fighting between Muslim and Christian communities flared in 1998 over the control of the disputed town of Poso. In the latest round of violence that erupted in late November, at least 300 people were killed and tens of thousands have been forced to flee their homes.

Under the December 20 deal, 51 religious, tribal and militia leaders agreed to end hostilities and cooperate with authorities in law enforcement. Two commissions are to be established—one dealing with law-and-order and the other with economic and social issues. Jakarta has promised $10 million in aid to restore destroyed homes, places of worship and schools and repatriate refugees to the area.

While some leaders have expressed hope that the deal will end the bloodshed, it is the fifth such agreement since 1998. Even if the money promised by President Megawati Sukarnoputri and Coordinating Minister for Social Welfare Jusuf Kalla reaches the province, it will hardly make a dent in the grinding poverty that lies at the root of the turmoil.

The Central Sulawesi is one of the most economically backward regions of Indonesia, with bulk of the population relying on fishing and farming. The area has been virtually neglected in Jakarta's economic development plans and has a high level of unemployment. Communications are poor. Poso, for instance, has no airport. Troop reinforcements have to land at Palu then travel by road for four hours to reach Poso.

As in other areas of Indonesia, the economic decline in 1997-98 heightened social and political tensions in Central Sulawesi, which were then exploited by both local and national leaders. The Christian community constitutes about 60 percent of the population. Since Indonesian independence in 1949, local politics has been dominated by factional wrangling over business interests and power. The tensions sharpened as a result of Jakarta's policy of transmigration, under which large numbers of mainly Muslim people were settled in outer provinces such as the Sulawesi.

Fighting between rival armed gangs was sparked in 1998 by a drunken brawl between Muslim and Christian gangs. Outbreaks of violence continued, fuelled in part by clashes between Christians and Muslims in the neighbouring Malukas. In May 2000, hundreds of people, mostly Muslims, died, prompting the Islamic fundamentalist group Laskar Jihad to dispatch of hundreds of its militia to the region in July 2000.

Laskar Jihad, which is based in Java and led by Ja'far Umar Thalib, could have up to 7,000 fighters in the province, according to Michael Elmquist, a UN official who recently visited the area. Christian militia groups in the area, including one known as the Red Force, are just as ruthless in their methods. In the latest fighting, Christians and Muslims alike went into hiding to avoid being the victims of revenge attacks.

President Megawati Sukarnoputri and the military have both been accused of failing to curb the violence. The US Ambassador to Indonesia, Robert Gelbard, who relinquished the post in October, has publicly demanded a crackdown on Laskar Jihad and has been critical of Megawati's refusal to do so.

Megawati's reluctance is in part due to her reliance on rightwing Islamic-based parties which backed the

© World Socialist Web Site

protracted moves to impeach and oust her predecessor, Abdurrahman Wahid. Both Hamzah Haz, head of the United Development Party and now vice president, and Amien Rais, chairman of the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR), have in the past called for tough action by the military to "defend Muslims" in areas of conflict such as the Sulawesi.

There are signs, however, that Washington is exerting strong pressure on Jakarta to take action against Laskar Jihad, which has been accused of having connections to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. The group has repeatedly denied the allegations.

During a tour of South East Asia in early December, Admiral Dennis Blair, US commander-in-chief in the Pacific warned that Indonesia may become a haven for Al-Qaeda members fleeing from Afghanistan, given the lax border controls and the presence of "sympathetic groups". He said that US intelligence was looking closely at the operations of Laskar Jihad.

At the same time, the US Embassy in Jakarta issued a list of 45 countries where al-Qaeda and affiliated groups had cells. Indonesia was not on the list but the message from the US military was clear enough: unless something is done about Laskar Jihad, the country could find itself accused of "harbouring terrorists".

The visit brought an abrupt change of tone in Jakarta. Without offering any evidence, military intelligence chief, Lieutenant-General Abdullah Hendropriyono, declared on December 12, that the violence in Sulawesi was "the result of cooperation between international terrorists and domestic radical groups." He directly linked Laskar Jihad to the Al Qaeda network, which he claimed had bases on the Sulawesi.

The next day Defence Minister Matori Abdul Djalil reiterated the point, saying: "What was said by the head of intelligence yesterday was based on fact and data." He added: "We will wage war on terrorism. We must take firm and forceful steps."

One of the reasons for the statement emerged just days later. On December 20, the US Congress approved a $318 million defence appropriations bill to fund "counterterrorism" training for officers in South East Asia, including Indonesia. The bill circumvents a two-year ban on military cooperation between Indonesia and the US put in place following widespread violence by Indonesian-backed militia groups in East Timor in 1999. Both the Indonesian military and the Bush administration have been pushing for an end to the ban, known as the Leahy amendment, and the reestablishment of close ties.

It is not surprising that the Indonesian military is hitching its wagon to Bush's "global war on terrorism". Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, the military top brass has had to try to refashion its image, tarnished by more than three decades of brutal dictatorship. By targetting Laskar Jihad, Hendropriyono no doubt calculates that the armed forces can strengthen their political position at home as well as consolidate links with the US and its military establishment.

A one-sided war on Laskar Jihad will not, however, end the fighting in Central Sulawesi let alone address the profound social crisis or underlying political issues that led to the sectarian violence.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site