

Religious leaders worried about govt failure to protect rights

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Religious leaders are condemning the government for failing to protect its followers while they perform their rituals, following a series of attacks on the congregation of HKBP Pondok Timur Church in Bekasi, West Java, by locals allegedly supported by a hard-line Muslim organization.



Interfaith dialogue: International Conference of Islamic Scholars (ICIS) secretary-general and Nahdlatul Ulama former chairman Hasyim Muzadi (center) speaks during a dialogue between Muslims and Christians at the HKBP Church in Bekasi, on Tuesday. Some hard-liners attacked the HKBP congregation, on Sunday. Hasyim condemned the attack. JP/Wendra Ajistyatama

Hasyim Muzadi from 40-million-strong Islam organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) deplored Tuesday the assault on religious freedom. "We reserve our rights as citizens to practice our beliefs. No one can forbid us to worship, including the government, let alone our own community," Hasyim said during a dialogue between Muslims and Christians at the HKBP Church on Tuesday.

Hasyim said that people should differentiate between worship activities and administrative issues such as legal licenses.

"For administrative matters, let's leave [licensing] to the congregation and the government," he said.

"[Regarding worship activities], the government should protect followers of any religion so they can perform their rituals without the threat of violence."

He called on diverse communities in the neighborhood to learn more about religious tolerance. "Let's build together a harmonious inter-religious life," he said.

On Sunday, the HKBP congregation was attacked for the fifth time by the Islamic Community Forum (FUI) when the former was about to commence their service at 8 a.m. on the street in front of the sealed church construction site. At least 20 members of the congregation, mostly women, sustained injuries during the attack, which occurred in the presence of hundreds of Bekasi Police officers.

The police inaction has sparked further outrage among the public following the controversial attendance of Jakarta Governor Fauzi Bowo and Jakarta Police chief Insp. Gen. Timur Pradopo at the 12th anniversary celebration of the Islam Defenders Front (FPI). The FPI, an FUI affiliate, has a long record of involvement in violence targeting minority groups' places of worship.

The Interfaith Dialogue Commission at the Conference of Indonesian Bishops chair (KWI) Mgr. Petrus Canisius Mandagi believed that Muslims and Christians had once lived peacefully together in Indonesia, where they respected each other. "We love each other. But there are several people from mass organizations, provoking the attacks," he told the participants of the dialogue.

Meanwhile, Nus Reimas from the Indonesian Church and Bible Association (PGLII) dubbed the attacks "ridiculous".

"The congregation has been there for almost 20 years. Why are the disturbances happening now?" he said.

He said he was worried the attack would set a precedent for a downward spiral in the country's religious tolerance. For around 1,500 members of the HKBP Pondok Timur, the question is whether it can hold a service this Sunday.

Church minister Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak asked for protection from the government to ensure that the congregation could perform service Sunday. "One essential human right is to be able to worship in our own land without fear," she said.

Separately, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono told police to be more responsive to anticipate potential religious violence. "Police should effectively anticipate the situation [from deteriorating] by putting more attention on signs leading to violence," he said during a Cabinet meeting. (ipa)