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INDONESIA: PASTOR FORCED TO STOP WORSHIP SERVICES IN HOME

Residents reject letter of permission from Religious Affairs department.



Syaiful Hamzah and wife Tiolida Sihotang

JAKARTA, September 25 (Compass Direct News) – Residents in North Jakarta have ordered the pastor of a small congregation to cease holding services in his home, despite a letter of permission issued by the Religious Affairs department.

On Sept. 12 village officials in South Rawa Badak, Koja district called a meeting with pastor Syaiful Hamzah and his wife Tiolida Sihotang, police officers, and representatives from the village mosque. Officials urged Hamzah and his wife to sign a document agreeing to cease all worship services in their home, effectively rejecting permission granted by Religious Affairs officials.

During the meeting, a sympathetic Muslim cleric, Wasi Sholeh, informed Hamzah that "certain people" had made violent threats against him, and that he could not guarantee Hamzah's safety if he refused to sign the agreement. Mosque official Mohammad Ayub told Hamzah, a convert from Islam, that he should change his name to a Christian name, although there is no law in Indonesia requiring him to do so.

The couple eventually signed the document under duress. Other signatories included an official from the Religious Affairs department, Adi Eli Zendito, Ayub and village head Mohammad Maibu.

Hamzah has now arranged to hold services in a building used by a registered church about three kilometers (1.86 miles) away from his home. Aside from the rental fee, he will now have to rent cars to take congregation members to and from the service, since most of them have no means of transport.

Hamzah's small congregation first began holding informal meetings in his home in 2003. Meetings were initially held on Saturdays. When numbers increased to 25, the congregation decided to hold worship services on Sunday mornings.

In accordance with a Joint Ministerial Decree regulating places of worship, Hamzah on Aug. 1 wrote to the Jakarta office of the Religious Affairs department describing his ministry and seeking permission to hold simple services in his home.

The department replied on Aug. 5 with a letter granting permission to hold such services.

Hamzah then submitted a copy of the letter to several local government offices, including the village council, local Public Order officials and the mayor's office. He also advised local and district police stations of his ministry activities.

A few days later, he received a letter of objection from the community's Public Order official, dated Sept. 7 and signed by a number of local residents.

The letter asked Hamzah to suspend worship services on the grounds that local Public Order officials had not given their consent, and it claimed that those attending were not resident in the village, a condition of the Joint Ministerial Decree.

Hamzah was then ordered to attend a meeting in Maibu's office on Sept. 12 to settle the dispute.

END



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*** Photos of pastor Syaiful Hamzah and his wife Tiolida Sihotang are available electronically. Contact Compass Direct News for pricing and transmittal.



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