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News

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## INDONESIA: VILLAGE TO BE REBUILT FOLLOWING ISLAMIC RAMPAGE

**Officials question Christian teacher whose alleged comment was said to trigger violence.**



**Destroyed building in Letwaru**

protestors gathered outside the education agency office and police headquarters on Dec. 9, and the protest quickly escalated into a full-scale riot.

Enraged Muslims destroyed 69 buildings, including two church buildings of a single congregation, 42 homes owned by Christians, four shops and a village hall. They also inadvertently struck 16 homes owned by Muslims.

Several people, including a police officer who attempted to stop the mob, were wounded during the rampage, according to Christian support organization Open Doors.

The time that lapsed between the Nov. 23 flyer and the Dec. 9 rioting shows that police were lax, said pastor Maureen Latuihamallo Ferdinandus, head of the Maluku Protestant Church (GPM) in Letwaru.

"The blasphemy issues had been spread since Nov. 23 – the time span until the day of the riot, Dec. 9, was long enough," she said. "Yet police failed to anticipate the big protests and village rampage."

### Reconstruction, Relief Efforts

"We are committed to finishing the reconstruction of homes and churches before Christmas, so Christians won't have to celebrate it in temporary shelters," regency head Abdullah Tuasikal told *The Jakarta Post* yesterday.

Tuasikal had asked all construction workers in the area to participate in reconstruction efforts, while provincial and regency administrations allocated 2 billion rupiah (US\$181,000) to the project.

The rebuilding of Syiloam Church began on Saturday (Dec. 13). Officials also promised to replace 200 chairs burned in the attack.

At press time, relief was trickling through to 1,764 people displaced by the riots, 1,523 Christians and 241 Muslims. The whereabouts of another 200 people are unknown.

Letwaru village, with a predominantly Christian population, borders a Muslim village with a narrow street separating both communities. When rioting broke out, the mob unknowingly attacked 16 homes occupied by Muslims on the Letwaru side of the street.

**AMBON, Indonesia, December 17** (Compass Direct News) – Government officials in Central Maluku, Indonesia, yesterday promised to reconstruct before Christmas two church buildings and a number of houses set ablaze last week during sectarian rioting in Letwaru village, Masohi district.

The promises came after hundreds of activists from a local youth organization protested in the streets of nearby Ambon on Monday (Dec. 15), holding these officials responsible for failing to maintain law and order, local media reported.

Also on Monday, police formally questioned a Christian elementary schoolteacher accused of making an anti-Islamic comment. Welhelmina Holle has been accused of insulting Islam while tutoring one of her students; following the Nov. 23 distribution of a flyer expressing the allegation against the schoolteacher, around 500



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Critics say that government relief is far from adequate. Pastor Ferdinandus said displaced villagers desperately needed food and water, clothes, stoves and cooking utensils. Water was the first priority, as supplies were limited in the police station and prison that had provided temporary housing to some of the villagers.

Most of the displaced Christians took refuge in their relatives' homes in neighboring villages, while Muslim victims opted to stay with relatives in the nearby town of Masohi.

"We've faced difficulties in identifying the needs of the displaced people since they are scattered," Ferdinandus told Compass.

Last Friday (Dec. 12), three days after the riots, the streets of Letwaru were deserted. Few Christians dared venture out to the office or market; one resident told Compass that she had not yet returned to her office because "it's not safe yet." Life continued as normal, however, in downtown Masohi, an area where most residents are Muslims.

Maluku police chief Brig. Gen. Mudji Waluyo told *The Jakarta Post* that he would assign two-thirds of the Central Maluku police force to maintain security in the area during Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations, in addition to military troops.

Police have named Asmara Wasahua, Muhammad Patty – and Holle, the schoolteacher – as suspects in the riot. According to local media reports, police have accused Wasahua, a local candidate of the Islamic Justice and Welfare Party, of distributing hate flyers and mobilizing the protesters.

**Discouraging Retaliation**

Ferdinandus has urged her congregation in Letwaru not to retaliate, despite personal losses. "Up to now, none of our congregation has fought back," she told Compass.

She said she believed that the riot was planned in advance.

"We were caught by surprise," she said. "The assailants, on the other hand, looked as if they had carefully prepared for the attack."

According to the pastor, the long-term education of Christian children who had until last week attended schools in Muslim neighborhoods would "definitely be disrupted" because of the riots.

When asked about the possibility of another large-scale religious conflict, Ferdinandus said the incident was not purely religious, but that certain groups had used the accusations against teacher Holle "as a political vehicle" to further their own interests. She added however, that "riots like these can start and end anytime. Things become very unpredictable."

Ferdinandus also felt police should have dealt swiftly with the allegations against Holle before offended parties took to the streets.

According to Open Doors, in May a mob attacked another Christian village in Maluku, killing three people and destroying 116 homes.

These incidents, though isolated, suggest ongoing tension between Christian and Muslim communities in the Maluku islands, where violent religious conflict between 1999 and 2002 claimed at least 7,000 lives.

END

\*\*\* A photo of buildings burned in the riots is available electronically. Contact Compass Direct News for pricing and transmittal.

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