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Indonesia: Situation of ethnic Chinese Christians in Indonesia (2001 - 2003)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

While most of Indonesia's Christian population resides in the eastern parts of the country (ICT 19 Dec. 2001; *International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002, Sec. 1), particularly the provinces of Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, North Maluku, North Sulawesi and Papua, "significant" Christian populations also reside in the provinces of North Sumatra, West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan and on Java (ibid.). In December 2001, the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) stated that Christians are also concentrated in Indonesia's major cities (19 Dec. 2001). Approximately three per cent of Indonesia's population is ethnic Chinese (*Country Reports* 31 Mar. 2003, Sec. 5c), most of whom are Christians (*The Straits Times* 6 Jan. 2000; AP 28 Aug. 2001; ICT 19 Dec. 2001). As of December 2001, Christians comprised five per cent (10.5 million) of Indonesia's total population (210 million) (ibid.).

*The New York Times* reported that Indonesia's national culture has traditionally been "overwhelmingly tolerant and inclusive" (29 Dec. 2001). The BBC also reported that the country, which is comprised of approximately 17,000 islands (CFI 24 Sept. 2003), is "a very big place," most of which is "peaceable and tolerant," and that the violence between religious and ethnic groups is "often apparently the work of agents provocateurs" (BBC 18 Aug. 2001). However, according to *International Religious Freedom Report 2002*, religious intolerance became a "growing concern" to persons of minority religions (and Muslim moderates), due to increased religious intolerance by Muslim extremists towards religious minorities, including Christians (7 Oct. 2002, Sec. III).

Information specific to the situation of ethnic Chinese who are Christian, in Indonesia, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, sources consulted made reference only to ethnic Chinese without mentioning their religion or to Christians without mentioning their ethnicity.

### Situation of Ethnic Chinese

According to a report entitled *Indonesia: Regional Conflicts and State Terror* by Minority Rights Group International (MRG),

Resentment against the Chinese runs deep in Indonesia. They were never accepted as full citizens; formerly, they were not allowed to participate in politics and were barred from the military and the civil service. There was also a special code to denote ethnic Chinese on their compulsory identity cards. Chinese Indonesians had to forego their Chinese name and adopt an Indonesian one. The political culture treated them as alien, despite their contribution to economic life (2001, 7).

In the mid-1960s, what MRG described as Indonesia's "right-wing elements"-the army and conservative Islamic groups-identified the ethnic Chinese community with communism, an association that stuck with the Chinese at least into 1999 (MRG 2001, 10). In addition, the Chinese community was "blamed unjustly for the collapse of the economy" in 1997, all of which made them "an easy target" for the violence, which broke out with the currency crisis (ibid.). According to the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch's Asia Division, "the ethnic Chinese of course are a perennial target any time social unrest breaks out" in Indonesia (HRW 24 Oct. 2000). A fact also reported by ICT in 2001 (19 Dec. 2001) and in 2002, by Paul Marshall (*The New York Post* 15 Oct. 2002), the senior fellow at the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, and at the Center for Religious Freedom of Freedom House, and the author of many books, including *Islam at the Crossroads: Understanding Its Beliefs, History and Conflicts* (Claremont Institute n.d.).

During the Asian financial crisis in 1997, "[m]any businesses belonging to Indonesian Chinese were destroyed" (MRG 2001, 10). In addition, "Chinese women were hunted down and raped and killed by gangs, which appeared to be well organized" (ibid.). These attacks were aimed at the ethnic Chinese in part because they "seemed to have benefited from economic policies more than others, [so that] during the Asian economic crisis it was the Chinese shopkeepers who were accused of hoarding goods" (HRW 24 Oct. 2000).

In February 2003, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* cited an Indonesian Catholic priest, who is currently residing in south Philadelphia, as stating that "[i]f there is turmoil in Indonesia, the victims are always Christians or (ethnic) Chinese" (18 Feb. 2003).

However, the Presidential Instruction implemented by President Suharto, which for 32 years had banned the use of Chinese symbols and restricted various other Chinese cultural traditions, was revoked in 1999 by President Wahid (MRG 2001, 8), who, throughout his presidency, advocated religious tolerance and defended Indonesia's ethnic Chinese and Christian populations (*Daily Telegraph* 23 June 2001; UPI 31 May 2001; UPI 3 Mar. 2001). While this move was intended to free members of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese community to practise their culture, language and religion, they were reluctant to exercise these rights openly for fear they would become "targets of strong anti-Chinese sentiment" (MRG 2001, 8). According to a June 2001 BBC news report written three years after the Presidential Instruction was revoked, ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were still not permitted to use their Chinese names, but instead, were to use "Indonesian-sounding names or give up their citizenship" (28 June 2001).

In 2001, the Associated Press (AP) reported that "after generations of often violent discrimination, new laws have helped peel away old hatred and many of Indonesia's 7 million ethnic Chinese citizens are now quietly optimistic about the future" (28 Aug. 2001). Although, for example, the United States Department of State reported that in 2002 "there were instances of discrimination and harassment" of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia (*Country Reports* 31 Mar. 2003, Sec. 5c), *Freedom in the World 2003* reported that the extent of the violence was "far less than in the late 1990s, when violent attacks killed hundreds and destroyed many Chinese-owned shops and churches" (Freedom House 2003). However, violence against Christians and ethnic Chinese on the central island of Java has been rising since 2000 (*New York Post* 15 Oct. 2002).

Beginning in 2003, the Chinese New Year, which is celebrated on 25 February, was officially made a holiday (*International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002, Sec. II), and it was celebrated by Chinese Christians in churches in Jakarta without incident (*Jakarta Post* 15 Feb. 2003).

For additional information on the situation of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, please refer to "National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities" in section 5 of *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2002*.

### **Situation of Christians**

While the Indonesian constitution provides for freedom of religion, some religious activity and those religions not given official status, face restrictions (*International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002, Sec. II). The Indonesian government officially recognizes only Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism and Hinduism (ibid.).

Although religious instruction in one of the five officially recognized religions is required for students in elementary and secondary public schools, "in practice few schools offer classes in all of the officially recognized faiths, and in many schools only one class was offered" (ibid.).

In September 2003, Christian Freedom International (CFI) sources, whose identities were withheld for security reasons, indicated that "even Christians with professional credentials and advanced degrees are being denied employment and advancement in the job market" (CFI 24 Sept. 2003). Claiming that violence was being used to achieve business objectives, CFI also described the situation of an Indonesian accountant who is a Christian (ibid.). Apparently, the man had entered into a business partnership with a Muslim acquaintance because "Christian entrepreneurs, who have low incomes or no jobs, often seek investment capital from wealthy Muslims" (ibid.). The Muslim acquaintance provided the capital for the creation of an accounting firm, but, four years later, when the accounting firm began to be profitable, the Muslim acquaintance demanded more money than what had been agreed upon (ibid.). The accountant refused, so the Muslim acquaintance "accused him of supporting separatist Christian guerrillas, and spread this rumour at a nearby mosque" (ibid.). Extremists from the mosque then attacked the accountant, destroyed his car and raided his office (ibid.).

Conflict and violence between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia has been reported by various sources covering the period between 2000 and 2003 (HRW 24 Oct. 2000; ICT 19 Dec. 2001; *The New York Times* 29 Dec. 2001; MRG 2001; *The Nation* 24 Jan. 2002; *The New York Post* 15 Oct. 2002; *Le Monde* 23 Oct. 2002; *International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002; HRW Dec. 2002; BBC 28 Apr. 2002; *Philadelphia Inquirer* 18 Feb. 2003; ICC 16 July 2003; *National Review Online* 28 Oct. 2003; CFI 24 Sept. 2003; USCR 2003; Freedom House 2003; HRW 2003).

In December 2001, ICT reported on an attack on a ferry that was transporting Christian merchants to the city of Ambon (19 Dec. 2001). The attack killed nine people and wounded two others (ICT 19 Dec. 2001). In the same city, on 12 December 2001, seven people were killed when a bomb exploded aboard a commercial boat carrying Christian passengers (ibid.). These attacks took place after clashes between Muslims and Christians were renewed in the town of Poso in Central Sulawesi province (ibid.), and before 20 bombs exploded "in the vicinity of Christian churches in nine Indonesian towns," which left 18 people dead on 24 December 2001 (*Le Monde* 23 Oct. 2003).

The government of Ambon suspected that Muslim paramilitary groups were responsible for the attacks in the city (ICT 19 Dec. 2001). The chief culprit was identified as Laskar Jihad (LJ) (ibid.), the Holy War Army (ICC 16 July 2003). According to the BBC, Laskar Jihad is a "paramilitary organisation [that has] sent hundreds of warriors from Java to eastern Indonesia, where they have been involved in attacks on Christians" (28 Apr. 2002). A news report,

published in the Bangkok-based daily *The Nation*, indicated that LJ's "stated mission is to defend Muslims against what they called 'Christian attacks' in Indonesia's Maluku and Sulawesi islands" (24 Jan. 2002). International Christian Concern (ICC) has described LJ as "a self-styled army of Islamic warriors, who are waging a 'holy war' against Christians" (16 July 2003). Jafar Umar Thalib, the group's leader, is "believed to have close ties to the former regime of ex-dictator Suharto" and has reportedly "stepped up its activities in Papua province" (BBC 28 Apr. 2002). Following the December 2001 peace agreement in Central Sulawesi and the February 2002 peace agreement in Maluku (*International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002), LJ officially disbanded on 12 October 2002; however, "there is fear that [the group] may have only gone underground" (ICC 16 July 2003). (For additional information on LJ, please refer to IDN38456.E of 22 February 2002, IDN39734.E of 12 September 2002, IDN39735.E of 20 September 2002 and IDN40527.E of 15 November 2002.)

Reporting in 2001, the ICT observed that the provincial capital city of Ambon (Maluku province) has been "torn by sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians for the past three years" (19 Dec. 2001). Between January 1999, when the violence began, until December 2001, over 5,000 people from both communities had died and around five hundred thousand, mostly Christian people had "fled the province [Malukku] amid reports that foreign Islamist mercenaries were flocking to the islands" (ICT 19 Dec. 2001). In Sulawesi, at least 1,000 people had been killed as of 19 December 2001 due to similar violence (ibid.). The *New York Times*, corroborating information on the violence and casualties in Maluku province on 29 December 2001, also indicated that "communal wars in Sulawesi and the Maluku islands have involved the bloodiest clashes between Muslims and Christians." MRG referred to these clashes in Ambon and other parts of Maluku province as "civil war" (2001, 14). Although violence in Maluku province dropped in 2002 from its 2000 and 2001 levels (*International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002, Sec. III), violence there and in Sulawesi was continuing in 2002 (*The New York Post* 15 Oct. 2002). For additional information on the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Maluku province, please refer to the MRG report. For additional information on inter-religious violence in Central Sulawesi, please refer to the December 2002 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report entitled *Breakdown: Four Years of Communal Violence in Central Sulawesi*.

After the peace agreement was signed between Christians and Muslims in the province of Maluku in February 2002 (Freedom House 2003), the violence, which was "linked in part to disputes over jobs, land, and other economic and political issues" (ibid.) occasionally broke out during the year (Freedom House 2003).

For additional information on the situation of Christians in Indonesia in 2002, please refer to the *International Religious Freedom Report 2002*, the *World Refugee Survey 2003* and *Human Rights Watch World Report 2003*.

With police unable to handle the sectarian violence, efforts to separate the police from the armed forces began in 1999 (HRW 24 Oct. 2000). According to the Human Rights Watch executive director, the police

... were the poorest trained and poorest paid of any part of the security forces, and were thus not effective as law enforcers. ... In some places, as in Ambon, the police were seen to be from one side of the conflict, so that there were allegations that the police were supporting the Christians and the army was supporting the Muslims (HRW 24 Oct. 2000).

*International Religious Freedom Report 2002* indicated that in conflict areas,

... [s]ome military units were accused of siding with their co-religionists, both Muslim and Christian, and supporting combatants, either directly or indirectly. The lack of an effective government response to punish perpetrators and prevent further attacks continued to lead to allegations that officials were complicit in some of the incidents or, at a minimum, allowed them to occur with impunity (7 Oct. 2002).

Similarly, Paul Marshall indicated in October 2003 that "[i]n recent years, the authorities responded slowly, if at all, when terrorists killed ethnic Chinese [and] bombed dozens of churches on Christmas Eve in 2000" (*National Review Online* 28 Oct. 2003).

Additional information related to state protection available to ethnic Chinese or Christians in Indonesia could not be found by the Research Directorate among the sources consulted. Please see the attachment by ICC for more detailed information on inter-religious violence in Indonesia.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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#### Additional Sources Consulted

IRB Databases

TAPOL, The Indonesia Human Rights Campaign, in Croydon, United Kingdom, did not respond to a letter requesting information.

#### **Internet sources, including:**

*Antara*

Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, Asia Pacific Business

*Christian Freedom International*

*Christian Monitor*

European Country of Origin Information Network

*National Catholic Reporter*

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

*Surat Kabar*

United Kingdom, Immigration and Nationality Directorate

#### **Search engine:**

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#### Attachment

International Christian Concern (ICC). 16 July 2003. "Asia: Indonesia."  
<<http://persecution.org/Countries/indonesia.html>> [Accessed 21 Nov. 2003]

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