

December 5, 2001: Commission Writes Secretary Powell About Sectarian Violence in Indonesia

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WASHINGTON - With Muslim-Christian violence flaring yet again in Indonesia, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency advising the Administration and Congress, yesterday wrote Secretary of State Colin L. Powell to call attention to an increasingly alarming situation. "There is ... great concern that widespread killing - based almost entirely on religious affiliation - may take place in parts of Sulawesi," wrote Commission Chair Michael K. Young. "The Commission is concerned also that the Indonesian government is not giving the situation in Sulawesi the attention it requires." The full text of the letter follows: December 4, 2001 The Honorable Colin L. Powell Secretary of State Dear Secretary Powell: The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom remains deeply concerned about sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia. We are particularly concerned about the situation in Sulawesi, which has seen brutal violence between Christians and Muslims since April of last year. At this time, we are receiving reports that forces from the extremist militia group Laskar Jihad have entered central Sulawesi, massed outside the city of Tentena, and have started attacking and killing Christians there in retaliation for killings of Muslims that occurred last year. This is especially alarming because it was the presence of the Laskar Jihad in the Moluccas in May 2000 that seriously aggravated the fighting on those islands and the very great loss of life sustained there. The same outcome is feared for Sulawesi. The Commission is aware that the violence between Christians and Muslims in Sulawesi is complicated in origin. As with the situation in the Moluccas, there are economic and political rivalries that exacerbated the conflict, as many of the indigenous inhabitants of Sulawesi are Christian and many of the Muslims on the island are migrants who have come to the island only in recent decades. Resentments boiled over in the spring of last year and there was brutal, though limited, fighting between the two groups. However, as happened in the Moluccas, there is little doubt that the entrance of the Laskar Jihad will intensify the religious nature of the conflict and take the fighting to much deadlier levels. In the Moluccas, not only did the fighting worsen but reconciliation efforts between Christians and Muslims were deliberately thwarted by the Laskar Jihad. There is thus great concern that widespread killing-based almost entirely on religious affiliation may take place in parts of Sulawesi. The Commission is concerned also that the Indonesian government is not giving the situation in Sulawesi the attention it requires. In its May 2001 report, the Commission recommended that the U.S. government press the government of Indonesia to see that all outside militia forces, such as the Laskar Jihad, are removed from the sites of sectarian violence and that they and other groups are disarmed. To date, there is little evidence that the Indonesian government has made any effort in this regard. In addition, in its recent conclusions and recommendations (after a review of Indonesia's report), the United Nations Committee Against Torture notes that there are allegations that paramilitary groups responsible for torture and other ill-treatment in areas of Indonesia are supported by some parts of the Indonesian military and sometimes even joined by military personnel. The Committee also expressed concern over "a climate of impunity." The Commission respectfully recommends that the U.S. government maintain pressure on the Indonesian government 1) to pay serious attention to the sectarian conflicts in Indonesia, particularly in Sulawesi and the Moluccas; 2) to disarm and remove violent extremist vigilante groups such as the Laskar Jihad; 3) to bring under control rogue elements within the Indonesian security forces that support paramilitary groups such as Laskar Jihad; 4) to do everything possible to protect the safety of the peoples of Sulawesi; and 5) to ensure that perpetrators responsible for the killings are brought to justice. Because it is very difficult to obtain information about what is happening in Sulawesi, the Commission would very much appreciate additional information from the Department regarding the following questions: a. What is the U.S. government doing to find out more about exactly what is going on in Sulawesi? b. What is the Indonesian government doing to protect the people of Sulawesi from outside militia groups such as the Laskar Jihad, particularly the Christian population in the Poso-Tentena area, which is under direct attack by Laskar Jihad forces? c. What, if any, effort is the government of Indonesia making to disarm and remove extremist militias that exacerbate sectarian violence in Sulawesi, the Moluccas, and elsewhere in Indonesia? d. What effort is the Indonesian government making to solve the economic and political disputes and to promote reconciliation between Muslims and Christians in areas such as Sulawesi, and how effective can such efforts be if paramilitary forces such as the Laskar Jihad are not removed? e. What effort is the government making to bring to justice those responsible for the killings? The Commission fully appreciates the attention that the campaign against terrorism requires and also understands that Indonesia has a crucial role to play in that fight. However, we cannot let our battle against terrorism in one part of the world divert our attention from areas where other people are being killed due, at least in large part, to their religious affiliation. The Commission will continue to monitor events in Sulawesi and other areas in Indonesia where religion-based communal violence is occurring. We appreciate your consideration of our recommendations and your earliest response to our request for additional information. Thank you for your close attention to this very serious matter. Respectfully, Michael K. Young Chair

Michael K. Young, Chair

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