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Indonesia: Three years later, forcibly evicted Sampang Shi'a community still waiting to go home

On 26 August 2015, it will be three years since the Shi'a community from Sampang district in East Java, Indonesia, was attacked and forcibly evicted from their homes by anti-Shi'a mobs. At least 168 people, including 51 children, were attacked by around 500 people with sharp weapons and stones. One person was killed and several injured, whilst several homes were also destroyed.

After the attack, the villagers were housed in a sports centre in Sampang for nearly 10 months with basic facilities. Some community members were intimidated and harassed by local government officials, and told they had to convert to Sunni Islam if they wanted to return to their homes. The families were forcibly evicted again by local authorities, with the support of the local office of Ministry of Religion, the police, and forcibly relocated to another location in Sidoarjo, East Java – at least a four hour drive from their homes. They have since been prevented from returning to their village by local authorities.

The previous and current administrations have both pledged to return the forcibly evicted Shi'a community to their village and yet to date there has been no concrete action. During July and August 2013, then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono met with members of the community and promised to return them to their village and rebuild destroyed homes. Similarly, in August 2014, Minister of Religion Lukman Hakim – who held this position in both the previous and current administrations – met both the forcibly evicted Shi'a community in Sidoarjo and leaders of the Sunni community in Sampang, and claimed to be very optimistic that the Shi'a community could return to their homes. Further, during his presidential campaign, President Joko Widodo made a series of commitments, including to protect the rights of marginalised communities and to protect principles of pluralism and diversity. However, these words have failed to translate into tangible results. The community remain in limbo, uncertain of their future.

The Indonesian authorities must take steps to ensure the safe, voluntary and dignified return of the forcibly evicted Shi'a community back to their homes and to provide assistance and compensation so as to enable them to rebuild the homes that were damaged or destroyed. They must investigate all reports of government officials being directly or indirectly involved in forcing Shi'a and other minorities to renounce their faith,

and provide the affected community with effective remedies for the human rights violations perpetrated against them, including compensation for the harm suffered and damage and destruction of their homes, rehabilitation, restitution and guarantees of non-repetition.

In a similar case, an Ahmadiyya community in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara province have spent more than nine years in a temporary shelter after they were forcibly evicted by a violent attack in February 2006.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed in Article 18(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Indonesia is a state party. Further, as a State Party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Indonesia has an obligation under Article 11 to respect, protect and fulfil the right to adequate housing for all of its people, including providing victims of forced evictions with an effective remedy for violations they have suffered.

Further, we urge the Indonesian authorities to ensure that all religious minorities are protected and allowed to practice their faith free from fear, intimidation and attack. The forced eviction of this Shi'a community highlights a wider problem of religious intolerance and abuses against religious minority groups in Indonesia.