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Indonesia: Religious freedom under attack as Shi'a villagers face eviction

The threatened forced relocation of a Shi'a community living in temporary shelter in East Java is yet more evidence of the continuing discrimination against religious minorities in Indonesia, said Amnesty International.

An estimated 165 Shi'as, including 48 children, have been living in inadequate conditions at a sports complex in Sampang district on Madura Island since August 2012 when they were displaced after their village was attacked by a mob.

Credible local sources told Amnesty International that the authorities have given the villagers until March to convert to Indonesia's majority religion Sunni Islam if they wish to return to their homes.

"The Indonesian authorities must guarantee the safe, voluntary and dignified return of the Shi'a community to their homes, according to their wishes, and help them to rebuild the homes that were damaged or destroyed," said Isabelle Arradon of Amnesty International's Asia Pacific programme.

"They must also end discrimination against religious minorities in the country and investigate reports that the local and provincial authorities are coercing Shi'a followers to renounce their faith before they are allowed to return to their homes."

"Those involved in the attack on the Shi'a community in August must also be brought to justice in proceedings which meet international standards of fairness, without the imposition of the death penalty."

Conditions in the displaced Shi'a community's temporary shelter have continued to deteriorate.

Since 1 January the East Java provincial police have withdrawn the officers who had been protecting the community.

In late December, the local authorities halted food supplies and medical services. They had previously cut off food supplies on 22 November which had resumed on 4 December. Some of the children in the shelter have fallen sick over the last few weeks.

"The Indonesian authorities must ensure that the community is granted immediate access to essential services such as food and health services. In particular, more needs to be done to ensure that children who are currently unwell get access to adequate medical care," said Isabelle Arradon

The community, from Karang Gayam village in the Sampang district, were displaced in August 2012 when an anti-Shi'a mob of around 500 people attacked the community with sharp weapons and stones.

One person was killed and dozens were injured. The mob also set fire to 35 houses belonging to the Shi'a

community. Five people have so far been charged with the attack.

In May 2012, during its Universal Periodic Review at the Human Rights Council, the Indonesian government reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring the protection of freedom of religion and to address cases of religious intolerance.

However religious minority groups in Indonesia, including Shi'a, Ahmadiyya and Christian communities, still face harassment, intimidation and attacks. Those who commit acts of violence against religious minorities are rarely punished and communities have been displaced by attacks.

In a similar case, in Lombok, East Nusa Tenggara province, an Ahmadiyya community have been living for six years in inadequate housing after their homes were attacked and burnt by a mob in February 2006. The authorities have failed to resolve their situation or bring those responsible to justice.

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.