

## INDONESIA: MILITARY REPRESSION AGAINST THE BATAK CHURCH

### Summary

In late November 1992, a long-simmering conflict broke out in the open over the leadership of the Batak Protestant Christian Congregation (*Huria Kristen Batak Protestan* or HKBP) in north Sumatra. The head of the congregation is known as *ephorus*, roughly equivalent to "archbishop." In December, the North Sumatra branch of Indonesia's internal security agency, BAKORSTANASDA, intervened on one side of the conflict and issued a decree appointing its own choice for *ephorus*, a man who was a convicted embezzler. In the uproar and protests that followed, dozens of church members were arbitrarily detained, houses were searched without warrants, and press coverage of the situation was banned. As of January 18, 1993, some sixty people were believed to be in detention. Asia Watch called on the Indonesian government to release all those arbitrarily detained, to lift restrictions on freedom of expression and to allow members of HKBP full freedom of association to choose their leadership without government interference.

### Background to Intervention

The Toba clan of the Batak ethnic group in north Sumatra is largely Protestant, and the church is organized into a congregation, the HKBP, of some two million members, headed by an *ephorus* and a governing Central Council. The *ephorus* is elected for a six-year term. Between November 23 and 28, 1992, the HKBP, which has a history of social activism, convened its 51st Synod in Sipoholon, Tarutung, North Sumatra, at which the election of an *ephorus* was to take place. Rev. Dr. S.A.E. Nababan, the current *ephorus* elected in 1986, was being challenged by a faction within the HKBP close to the army. That faction was headed by the Secretary-General of the HKBP, one Rev. Simorangkir.

The synod was marked by demonstrations and disruptions. On the final night of the synod, November 28, at about 10 p.m., the session was in disarray, with Simorangkir's faction noisily claiming that Nababan was trying to block discussion of three items. There had been no election. Nababan suspended proceedings as an *ephorus* is authorized to do under HKBP's rules of governance; an army officer, Lt. Col. Paris Ginting, then appeared and ordered Nababan to leave the room.

After his departure, a rump session of the Central Council was held with Ginting; Colonel Daniel Toding, the regional military commander (DANREM 023); and Simorangkir, among others. Participants at the meeting told the press that the main subject of discussion was the security problems caused by the fractious synod.<sup>1</sup>

Later on, in the early hours of November 29, Simorangkir, claiming a mandate from the Central Council, called a general meeting of the synod, without the knowledge of Nababan, and read out a typed statement. Purporting to be the decision of the meeting the night before, it announced the formation of a caretaker council with Simorangkir himself as acting *ephorus*, on the utterly false grounds that Nababan had resigned for health reasons. Participants in that meeting, however, said no such decision had been reached or even discussed, and suggested the statement must have been prepared long in advance.<sup>2</sup> Members of the synod rejected Simorangkir's coup attempt and overwhelmingly voted to retain Nababan. Simorangkir then claimed that the HKBP had turned the leadership question over to the Indonesian government to resolve. Neither Simorangkir nor HKBP, however, had any authority to act without the agreement of the *ephorus*, i.e. Nababan.

As the meeting degenerated into a mass protest largely directed against Simorangkir, Colonel Toding, who was present throughout, ordered his men to arrest unruly members. He also, however, cancelled Simorangkir's "decision" to make himself acting *ephorus* and the meeting broke up.

### **The December 23 Decree**

Over the following weeks, tension remained high, and the HKBP headquarters in the village of Pearaja, Tarutung, was surrounded by the military. On December 23, Major General R. Pramono, the regional commander of BAKORSTANASDA, who is also the regional military commander, issued a decree appointing a member of the Simorangkir faction, Dr. S.M. Siahaan, as acting *ephorus*, effective December 31. Siahaan, former dean of the education faculty of the respected Nommensen University in North Sumatra, had been convicted of corruption in 1976 for embezzling university funds and sentenced to six months in prison; he was also accused of taking funds from HKBP's Education Foundation in Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra.<sup>3</sup>

The BAKORSTANASDA decree (appendix 1) claimed the intervention was necessary on national security grounds given the upcoming session in March 1993 of the People's Consultative Assembly which is expected to re-elect President Suharto. It cited two other decrees giving the government responsibility to settle the HKBP dispute. One was a BAKORSTANASDA decree dated February 27, 1991; the second was a Ministry of Religious Affairs decree dated October 21, 1992, meaning the military had decided to intervene long before the synod was ever convened. The December 23, 1992 decree also cited a report from the military commander, Colonel Toding, on the failure of the synod to elect a new *ephorus*, and a report by the Committee of the 51st Synod about matters the synod was unable to resolve. The latter report was

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<sup>1</sup> "Sinode 'Godang' HKBP Berakhir", *Suara Pembaruan*, November 29, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Penunjukan Pj. Eporus HKBP Undang Protes," *Sinar Pagi*, December 29, 1992.

prepared by Simorangkir. The decree also called for a special synod to be convened, in cooperation with BAKORSTANASDA, no later than mid-February 1993 to elect new officials for HKBP.

Outrage over the BAKORSTANASDA intervention was widespread and instantaneous. HKBP filed a law suit against the regional military commander and BAKORSTANASDA head, General Pramono. (On January 11, the court ruled in favor of HKBP.) Some 4,000 HKBP members marched to the provincial parliament in Medan on December 28, demanding the decree be revoked. Others gathered at the governor's mansion, and still others marched to the regional military headquarters. Security forces lined their route. A major Jakarta newspaper, *Suara Pembaruan*, wondered aloud whether BAKORSTANASDA had not gone too far and said the action constituted unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of the church.<sup>4</sup>

Curiously, the Interior Minister, General Rudini, and a senior minister close to President Suharto, Admiral Sudomo, the Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs and Security, publicly opposed the BAKORSTANASDA action, both claiming that they joined with church leaders in supporting Rev. Nababan. They thus stood in direct opposition to Commander of the Armed Forces, General Try Sutrisno, who backed General Pramono.<sup>5</sup>

On December 31, the day that Dr. Siahaan was to be inaugurated, thousands of HKBP members occupied the church at HKBP headquarters in Pearaja to prevent the ceremony from taking place. There were also demonstrations in Jakarta. The occupation of the church, as well as other protests throughout the Toba Batak area of North Sumatra, continued for the next two weeks.

### **Military Action Against HKBP**

On January 9, the Indonesian government issued a decree banning all individuals and organizations from commenting on the HKBP crisis. By the terms of the decree, only Sudomo, the Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs and Security, and General Pramono, the regional military commander, had the authority to make public statements on the issue. By this time, Sudomo had clearly changed his stance, telling the press that the BAKORSTANASDA move against HKBP was "justified and not an act of interference."<sup>6</sup>

This clear violation of freedom of expression proved to be the prelude to a military crackdown which began on January 15, 1993.<sup>7</sup> Eight church members staying in the home of Rev. J.A.U. Dolakseribu were seized by the army and taken to an undisclosed location. Rev. Daulat Sitorus, another minister who went to look for the eight was also seized. The house of the chief judge of the North Sumatra High Court, Judge Lintong Oloan Siahaan, who agreed to hear the HKBP law suit, was reportedly stoned and vandalized.

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<sup>4</sup> "Penunjukan Pejabat Ephorus HKBP," *Suara Pembaruan*, December 28, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> "Sudomo, Try seek solution to row over bishop's appointment," *Jakarta Post*, December 31, 1992; "State Should Stay Out of Church's Conflict: Rudini," *Jakarta Post*, January 2, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> "Sudomo bans all comments on church conflict," *Jakarta Post*, January 11, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Isolated arrests had taken place before: a Mr. Pangaribuan was arrested on January 6 and reportedly beaten in Balige, North Tapanuli, and Barita Simanjuntak was arrested on January 13. Both were released.

On January 16, at about 7 a.m., some 100 troops consisting of soldiers from the Bukit Barisan command, police, and military police, charged the occupied church, injuring at least three ministers and one lay person in the process. Two hours later, Rev. Nelson Siregar, the director of HKBP's community development program, and Rev. W.T. Simarmata, director of its education department, were summoned by the local military commander. They were later arrested and transported 300 km to the provincial capital, Medan, where they were held in the military headquarters, Gaperta. Thirty-six students were also detained, all but 10 of whom were released the next day.

On Sunday, January 17, a human rights lawyer, Laudin Napitupulu, from the Legal Aid Foundation's Medan office, was detained together with a HKBP minister, Rev. Togar Hasugian, and seven students and lay members. All were arrested at the house of a minister in the village of Aek Siancimun by police from the North Tapanuli command (POLRES). On the same day, about 30 police officers arrived at the house of Rev. Nababan, the HKBP *ephorus*, where many protestors had gathered. About 25 people, mostly students, were taken away in military vehicles.

On Monday, January 18, the head of HKBP's youth program, Rev. J.A.U. Dolakseribu (whose house had been stormed by police three days earlier) was arrested after performing a wedding service at the HKBP church on Jalan Sudirman, Medan.

As of January 18, some 60 HKBP members, including 43 students, were believed under arrest. Those detained in Gaperta, Medan were denied visits from their families, in violation of Indonesia's own Criminal Procedure Code.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The action against HKBP is taking place against the backdrop of heightened security measures more generally as the "election" of President Suharto approaches in March and of a fears of increased religious polarization between Indonesia's tiny Christian minority and the Muslim majority. A spate of attacks on Christian churches took place in November 1992 by Muslim groups fearful of "Christianization."

But tensions within the Batak church have been going on for years and have little to do with recent political developments. There is no justification for the action taken by BAKORSTANASDA against the church leadership. Asia Watch calls on the Indonesian government to release immediately and unconditionally all those arbitrarily arrested for peaceful protest in connection with the protests over BAKORSTANASDA intervention in HKBP's affairs, including Rev. Dolakseribu, Sakti Pakpahan, Hendrik Siagian, Rev. WTP Simarmata, Dr. Tumpak Tobing, and Haposan Tobing. It notes the action taken by BAKORSTANASDA to appoint an *ephorus* against the wishes of the congregation was in violation of the internationally-recognized right to freedom of religion and association. The arrest of peaceful protestors was a violation of their right to freedom of expression. Finally, Asia Watch calls for disciplinary action to be taken against Major General Pramono, the man responsible for the human rights abuses cited in this statement. General Pramono was also responsible for atrocities committed during the counterinsurgency campaign in Aceh in 1990-91.

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For More Information

Sidney Jones (212) 972-8400  
(718) 398-4186

*Asia Watch is an independent organization created in 1985 to monitor and promote internationally recognized human rights in Asia. The Chair is Jack Greenberg, the Vice Chairs are Harriet Rabb and Orville Schell, and the Executive Director is Sidney Jones.*

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