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Maluku-Republic (Special Report)

SOUTH MALUKU REPUBLIC AFTER EAST TIMOR?

By: Mohd Haikal Isa

AMBON, Indonesia, Jan 14 (Bernama) -- Conflict between Muslims and Christians over the last two years on the Maluku islands has so far claimed thousands of lives and there is no sign whatsoever of a solution.

Each side is accusing the other of starting fights which often end in death.

Muslims here claim, the conflict which was started by "certain groups" is a ploy to cover up their main agenda which they hoped to achieve.

They see what is happening on the Maluku islands as a repetition of what happened on the former Indonesian province of East Timor, which chose to become independent in a United Nations sponsored referendum.

The representative of the Maluku Islamic Religious Council (MUI) Haji Abdurrahman Khaw claimed several groups here had given a wrong picture to the world of the prevailing situation on Maluku such as accusing the Muslims of forcing Christians to convert to Islam.

"They are trying to influence world opinion that they are being forced to convert so that the United Nations will intervene or at least non-Muslim neighbouring countries will do so," he said.

Strongly denying that Muslims were forcing Christians to convert, he said such accusations were very strange and incomprehensible.

Abdurrahman Khaw was speaking to Bernama after receiving humanitarian assistance from Malaysia donated by Umno Youth, Budiman Foundation and the Ex-Students Association of the Mara Junior Science College (Ansara).

The Malaysian delegation was headed by the Chairman of the Umno Youth International Affairs Bureau Dr Shamsul Anwar Sulaiman who was accompanied by Ansara President Ansara Mukriz Mahathir and 20 others.

He said the groups were eagerly waiting for intervention in Maluku by foreign countries as this would help them realise their objective of bringing the islands out of the Republic of Indonesia.

"They hope intervention by foreign countries will ultimately enable them to secede from the Republic of Indonesia and set up their own Republic of South Maluku," he said.

He said that on Dec 18 at a meeting at the Hotel Amboina, leaders of the Christian community had set up the Front Kedaulatan Maluku (FKM) (Sovereign Maluku Front) under Dr Alex Manuputty with the aim of bringing the province out of Indonesia. Four other leaders of the Front were also present.

"The Front clearly wants the setting up of the Republic of South Maluku," he said.

However Dr Manuputty in an interview with the local paper Harian Umum Siwalima and quoted by the "Ambon Berdarah On-line" website denied that the FKM was a separatist movement.

"The FKM is not synonymous with the Republic of South Maluku," he said.

The FKM, Dr Manuputty said, was aimed at restoring the dignity of the Maluku people, which had been lost in the two years of conflict and with the authorities lacking the capacity to resolve it.

Dr Manuputty said the FKM did not differentiate the Maluku people on the basis of religion and considered all of them the same -- the community of Maluku suffering together the consequences of conflict.

In the interview, the FKM leader urged all groups involved in the dispute to put a stop to the two-year-old conflict and return to the path

of peace and reconciliation.

"The time has come for us to live in peace for all this while we have been like fighting cocks," he said.

Head of MUI-Maluku R.R Hassanusi claimed that Muslims had over the last two years tried to have a dialogue with Christians to resolve the conflict peacefully but it had not materialised.

The conflict over religion on the Maluku islands had created deep rifts in relations between the followers of the two religions.

Christians and Muslims lived in peace and harmony before but now things had changed with each community going about its daily life separately without any interaction with the other, Hassanusi said.

According to official statistics of the Maluku Civil Administration, 59.01 per cent of the people of Maluku were Muslims, 35.29 per cent were Protestants and 5.19 per cent were Roman Catholics.

However on Ambon island of the 311,974 people, Protestants comprised 51.92 per cent, Roman Catholics 5.55 per cent and Muslims 42.38 per cent.

Meanwhile Indonesia's Vice President Megawati Soekarnoputri during her recent visit to Malaysia expressed confidence that peace efforts in the various provinces were heading towards success.

She was speaking at a meeting with her countrymen working in Malaysia.

The meeting was part of her programme during her three-day official visit to Malaysia, the first since becoming Vice President in October 1999.

-- BERNAMA

MHI AHH AAM