

Indonesia: Cautious Calm in Ambon

I. OVERVIEW

Months after an outbreak of Christian-Muslim violence in Ambon, the city seems quiet. Local authorities learned some lessons from the clashes on 11 September 2011, sparked by the death of a Muslim motorcycle taxi (*ojek*) driver in a Christian area. Security forces, for example, have been quicker to arrive on the scene in fights that break out along religious lines. While not all those displaced have returned home, some innovative efforts have been initiated to use reconstruction to foster reconciliation. The government is much more conscious of the need to work with the telephone company to get mass text messages out when trouble occurs. Many issues remain unresolved, however, including physical segregation and mutual distrust between Christian and Muslim communities, inadequate police capacity and lack of transparency in investigations into high-profile incidents. Ambon is hosting a national Quran reading contest (Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran, MTQ) in mid-June, and local authorities see it as an opportunity to showcase the city as a model of harmonious relations and a desirable place to invest. Christian and Muslim leaders alike want the contest to succeed as a matter of local pride, and its starting date has become an informal deadline by which all physical reminders of the September violence are to be removed.

Another eruption of violence in mid-December, this time triggered by the unexplained death of a Christian public transport driver, was evidence of ongoing tensions. The city remains segregated, mutual suspicions run high and violence frequently flares from the most trivial of causes. Basic flaws in policing have not been fixed, and the absence of any serious investigations into high-profile incidents keeps the communities polarised and gives rise to conspiracy theories. When investigations do take place, as happened after the death of the motorcycle driver that triggered the September violence, the results are not made public, leading to allegations of cover-ups. Radical elements are active in Ambon, and their tendentious websites suggest a deliberate effort to fan communal flames.

Everyone interviewed could point to possible flashpoints ahead: elections for Central Maluku district head on 27 March 2012; the anniversary of the defunct independence movement, Republic of the South Moluccas (Republik Maluku Selatan, RMS) on 25 April; and the MTQ from 9 to 19 June. But as Ambon's bishop said in an interview in

January, "I'm not worried about the big days. The danger is on the ordinary days when no one's paying attention".

II. FOLLOW-UP TO 11 SEPTEMBER: RECONSTRUCTION

Three neighbourhoods were damaged in the 11 September violence: Waringin, Talake and Mardhika. A total of 750 households or 3,295 people were displaced, according to the governor.¹ Much of Waringin, a predominantly Muslim area, was burned to the ground. In a visit to a displaced persons' camp on 27 September, the coordinating minister for people's welfare, Agung Laksono promised that the government would help by giving Rp.59 million (\$6,500) per household to rebuild destroyed homes, Rp.25 million (\$2,700) to repair those with serious damage and Rp.5 million (\$560) to repair minor damage.²

Initially the funds were supposed to go through a government-provided contractor for quick reconstruction. But the displaced and the NGOs advocating on their behalf would have none of it. Courts were still hearing cases of corruption of government aid to victims of the conflict in 1999-2002 and no one trusted government contractors, who after earlier episodes of violence gave priority to those who paid extra, inflated the cost of building materials and produced shoddy results.³ Particularly for families from Waringin and Mardhika, who had lost their homes to arson for the third or fourth time in a decade, the idea of going through the government bureaucracy again was a nightmare.

An NGO activist saw an opportunity for reconciliation by getting the women of Waringin, mostly Muslim, together with women from the Christian neighbourhoods of Talake and Mardhika to lobby the city government for direct cash payouts of the amounts promised by Minister Laksono. Together they represented about 200 families, and

¹ "Menkokesra Bakal Berkunjung ke Ambon", *Ambon Ekspres*, 24 September 2011. For an analysis of the 11 September violence, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°128, *Indonesia: Trouble Again in Ambon*, 4 October 2011.

² "Janji Manis Menteri di Kamp Pengungsi", *Ambon Ekspres*, 28 September 2011.

³ Crisis Group interview, NGO activist, Ambon, 21 January 2012.

their common interest in securing the funds overcame whatever distrust for each other they might have initially felt. They organised themselves into a group and demanded meetings with city officials. From the meetings, the women would send text messages to NGO advocates to report on the state of negotiations and seek advice. In the evenings they would meet to review progress and plan the next day's tactics.

In the end, they succeeded in getting a promise of direct payments, and worked out a system with city officials for documentation of the damaged homes, since in the past there had been problems with fictive owners and individuals claiming worse damage than in fact occurred. This time, criteria were established for what constituted serious and less serious damage; the heads of household had to itemise the repairs needed; and a government photographer came around to photograph the house with the owner or head of household standing in front of it. Claims submitted had to include the itemised list, the corresponding photographs and the individual's identity card.

The first payment, 50 per cent of the promised amount, was made in December 2011, which is relatively quick under the circumstances; another 15 per cent was paid in January; and families are currently awaiting the final payment of the remaining 35 per cent. The women were continuing to meet to press for the remainder, although the deputy mayor said they were pushing on an open door, and that it was in the city's interests to see that they were paid quickly and in full so that the neighbourhoods were fully rebuilt and everyone moved back by the time of the MTQ contest in June.⁴

The direct payments avoided corruption but they were not problem-free. The number of carpenters and electricians to do the work required in each neighbourhood is limited, so the rebuilding and repairs have gone slower than expected. The cost of building materials has risen to the point that some have decided to use the cash to leave the old house as it is and move elsewhere. Still, for Ambon, both the process of lobbying and the outcome so far have been helpful in restoring a modicum of trust across communal lines, at least among the women involved, and between the community and the local government.

The trust does not necessarily get transferred to the women's children. The Waringin activists noted that despite a high rate of participation of neighbourhood youth in peace education programs, when the call came to mobilise last September, these teenagers were first on the front

lines, with rocks, sticks and whatever they could get their hands on.⁵

III. INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

Everyone has become more sophisticated about the use of information: the government, peace activists and hardline Islamists.

Since text messaging on mobile phones is the primary way information, true and false, is spread, the city government has an arrangement with the major mobile telephone service to broadcast mass messages to all phones in the area. Both the city government and the police have used the technology on several occasions, including during and after the September violence, to try to cool tensions and alert the public to avoid certain areas. It can be very effective, but it is also being used for bland civic exhortation. A message in late January 2012 read: "Dear residents of Ambon city, we are going to have many foreign tourists at the beginning of this year. Let's keep the image of our city as SWEET, FRIENDLY and CLEAN".⁶ Overuse of the text service may blunt its impact in times of emergency.

An earlier Crisis Group update noted the work of an informal network calling itself the "peace provocateurs". Initially an improvised response to the September violence, the group refined its techniques over a very short time, so that when tensions rose sharply again in mid-December after the death of a Christian public transport driver, the network could quickly move into action. The basic elements remained the same as in September: people with mobile phones deployed to trouble spots to check rumours; information and photos sent back to a point person who acts as editor; and updates sent out via text, Facebook and Twitter. The latter was used in particular to feed into national television channels with interactive news programs to correct sensationalised and inaccurate reporting. Members of the network cheerfully acknowledge that they have no way of measuring their impact, but as long as violence does not spread, they are satisfied that they are making a contribution.

Extremist groups are also making effective use of information technology, especially through websites like www.voa-islam.com and internet chat rooms. The target audience appears to be more outside Ambon than in, using detailed reports on attacks by "salibis" or "crusaders", the pejorative term for Christians, to reinforce the concept of

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sam Latuconsina, deputy mayor of Ambon, 22 January 2012.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, NGO activist, Ambon, 21 January 2012.

⁶ Text message sent by the Ambon mayor's office in January 2012 as provided by the deputy mayor to Crisis Group, 2 February 2012.

kafir or infidel as the enemy. One site shortly after the September violence had a headline, “Ambon, Indonesia’s Gaza”.⁷ On 2 October, thousands attended a public rally in support of Ambonese Muslims in Bekasi, outside Jakarta, with the title “Exposing Facts and Data about the Christian Massacre of Ambonese Muslims”. The speakers were Afif Abdul Majid, head of the Central Java branch of Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), the organisation founded by radical cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, and www.voa-islam.com’s correspondent in Ambon, Ahmed Widad.⁸

The www.voa-islam.com site also equates Christians with RMS supporters. Months after the September violence, the website was continuing to fan the flames, in one instance using the child of the dead *ojek* driver to remind readers of the viciousness of “RMS Salibis” and urge them to donate funds for the little boy’s schooling.⁹ The site is important because it has a close relationship with the Indonesian Islamic Outreach Council (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, DDII), a national organisation that sends very conservative clerics to mosques around the country for Friday sermons. Its articles on Ambon were also picked up by other sites with a wide following.

Different tactics on information dissemination in the two communities foster different perceptions of the conflict. Every incident involving Christian assaults on Muslims, real or suspected, is picked up by radical and hardline sites and disseminated around Indonesia, fostering the belief that Muslims are the primary victims. In many cases, the basic facts in these reports are true, but the violence is not as one-sided as they suggest. Christian leaders have urged their followers to downplay attacks where the perpetrator is or suspected to be Muslim in the interests of keeping the peace, so while Muslim-on-Christian – and Muslim-on-Muslim and Christian-on-Christian – violence is also common, it is less often used to mobilise the community.¹⁰

IV. VIOLENCE IN NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER 2011

Several smaller “aftershocks” of the September violence generated tension within the city. On 17 November, a young man named Dani Polanunu from the Muslim neigh-

bourhood of Waihong was stopped in a police motorcycle inspection in front of the Hotel Abdul Ali. A Christian policeman reportedly threw a wooden chair at Dani, causing him to fall off his bike. While he was on the ground, other police allegedly came up and kicked him.¹¹ He was taken to the hospital and the next day angry Muslims blocked a road in Waihong in protest and demanded that the police officers involved be prosecuted. The deputy mayor, Sam Latuconsina, arrived on the scene and was able to calm the crowd of several hundred, with the help of a grassroots network he has developed in city neighbourhoods, including among local gangs.¹² Dani died on 19 November and his burial the next day attracted more protestors. This time, the number of police and military present equalled or exceeded the mourners. Several men on motorcycles, on their way home from the burial, threw stones at police posts in front of the al-Fatah mosque; Ambon Plaza; the Trikora statue in the centre of town, and Sirimau, causing minor damage, but there were no further repercussions.

More serious outbreaks took place in mid-December. On 12 December 2011, violence broke out in the neighbourhood of Air Mata Cina, where the Christian hamlet of Urimeseng is only separated from the Muslim community of Ponorogo by a small stream, about two metres wide. According to a Muslim witness, around 11 pm four Christians started shouting insults and hurling rocks across the stream at Muslim houses. Muslims responded, and within minutes there were crowds of several dozen on both sides throwing stones. About an hour after the brawl began, a few police appeared on the scene but they were so outnumbered that they did not attempt to control the crowds, who, as one witness said, were “very emotional”.¹³

Around 3am, someone on the Christian side threw a gasoline-filled bottle across the stream, and five houses were soon in flames. Two trucks of soldiers from the 733 Battalion then arrived and the situation was brought under control, but not before security forces fired warning shots, one of which hit Refelino Mahulete, a resident, in the chest, seriously wounding him.¹⁴ Eleven people were taken to the main Muslim hospital after being hit by rocks or arrows fired from slingshots, an Ambonese speciality; four

⁷ “Ambon, adalah Gaza-nya Indonesia”. www.erasmuslim.com, 3 October 2011,

⁸ “Tabligh Akbar mengungkap fakta & data pembantaian nasrani terhadap Muslim Ambon”, www.arahmah.com, 30 September 2011.

⁹ “Fahrurrizal bin Darmin Saiman: Anak Yatim Korban Kerusuhan Ambon Butuh Uluran Anda”, www.voa-islam.com, 4 October 2011.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Christian activist in Ambon, Jakarta, 21 January 2011.

¹¹ “Protes Kebiadaban Oknum Polisi Kristen Ambon, Massa Rusak Pos Polisi,” www.voa-islam.com, 21 November 2011. Other sources including local journalists confirmed the basic details of the case, although only the [voa-islam](http://www.voa-islam.com) had the detail about the chair.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Sam Latuconsina, Ambon, 22 January 2012 and subsequent text communication, 10 February 2012.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Muslim eyewitness, 1 February 2012.

¹⁴ “Aparat Keamanan Masih Disiagakan,” *Ambon Ekspres*, 15 December 2011.

were taken to Christian hospitals, including Mahulete.¹⁵ Some 70 families took shelter in the local mosque, where they were still camping out three days later.¹⁶ Many were afraid to go to school or work on 13 December, but by the next day, the city seemed back to normal.

On the evening of 14 December, however, a Christian public minibus (*angkot*) driver named Revaldo Petta was stabbed in the neck in his vehicle and crashed into a sidewalk in the centre of Ambon's business district. Word spread immediately that he had been stabbed on Sultan Baabdullah Street, in a Muslim neighbourhood, although others have suggested the vehicle might actually have been on a Christian street when the killing took place.¹⁷ A source said he was driving with a friend named Robert Matruty sitting beside him when someone boarded the *angkot* and knifed him (these vehicles have open backs with benches along the sides). Police confirmed that night that he died from the stab wound and said an investigation was underway.¹⁸

The day after the stabbing, thousands of mostly Christian *angkot* drivers and their supporters demonstrated in front of the provincial parliament and police command, as hundreds of armed soldiers and police stood by on alert. They demanded more protection in areas known for a high level of crime and a full investigation into their colleague's death, which the provincial police chief assured them would take place.¹⁹ As of early February, many Christian drivers were still afraid to pass through Muslim neighbourhoods, and efforts by police to divert *angkot* routes in the name of security were only causing more frustration.²⁰

These incidents created deep concern that the Christmas and New Year's holidays could see trouble, but with large numbers of extra security forces on duty, both passed without incident.

V. UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Of all the conflict-related issues in Ambon, one of the most frequently raised in interviews is the lack of transparency about investigations into high-profile incidents. The death of Darfin Saiman, the *ojek* driver whose death sparked the 11 September violence, remains a mystery. No one in Ambon seemed to know what happened to the investigation conducted days afterward by a forensic team from police headquarters in Jakarta. The police chief in Ambon said the results would have gone to the provincial police chief, not him; and in any case he had just arrived.²¹ The mayor's office did not know. Neither religious leaders nor NGOs had any idea. The national human rights commission (KOMNAS-HAM) whose own report was never released in full, had not seen any report. Neither had members of the Ambon city council who were still demanding information in late December.²² No autopsy of the body was ever conducted despite the family's willingness to have the body exhumed.

The same is true with regard to the *angkot* driver. One source said that instead of the police seriously pursuing the promised investigation, they hounded the driver's friend, Robert Matruty, trying to persuade him to confess to the crime until he went into hiding where he remained as of late January 2012.²³

There seems to be a sense on the part of local officials that the truth would be worse than just letting things cool down until people forget. The problem is they do not forget and each new incident builds on suspicions left over from the last. It is true that a finding that Darfin was murdered rather than having been the victim of an accident could revive demands for retaliation if it turned out the perpetrator was Christian, just as a finding that it had been an ordinary traffic accident could lead to accusations of a cover-up. But as long as no one is sure, each party will believe their own version of events in a way that increases distrust. If Muslims believe he was murdered by Christians, some NGO leaders believe he was murdered by security forces to create a situation that would show that they and their reinforcements (*bantuan kendali operation*, BKO) were still needed in Ambon and could therefore continue to draw on operational funding.²⁴ If the public

¹⁵ "Situasi Ambon pascabentrokan kembali pulih", Antara, 13 December 2011. These "Ambonese arrows", cheaply made weapons that children can make, were introduced into other conflict areas such as Poso by men who had fought in Maluku.

¹⁶ "Pasca Penerangan Perusuh Salibis: Pengungsi Muslim Amaci Ambon Menagih Janji," www.voa-islam.com, 17 December 2011 and "Wali Kota Ambon Laporkan Kerugian Akibat Bentrokan", *Tribun Yogy*, 14 December 2011.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, peace provocateur, 21 January 2012.

¹⁸ "Polisi Benarkan Sopir Angkot Ditusuk OTK", Antara, 15 December 2011.

¹⁹ "Sopir Angkot Ditusuk, Ambon Sempat Lumpuh", www.vivanews.com, 15 December 2011.

²⁰ "Normalisasi Jalur Angkot Segera Diberlakukan", *Ambon Ekspres*, 1 February 2012.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, police chief Soehar, Ambon, 20 January 2012. The city police chief at the time of the violence was apparently the only officer to be held responsible for police failures in September, even though he was only transferred, without any suggestion of negligence or incompetence.

²² "DPRD Kota Ambon kembali desak polisi ungkap provokator 11 September", Radio DMS, 29 December 2011.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Ambon journalist, 20 January 2012.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, NGO representative, Ambon, 19 January 2012.

can be assured that the investigation was thorough and impartial and the release of information can be carefully managed, truth is certainly better than letting speculation run rife.

The problems of policing that were so apparent on 11 September are not easily fixed, in part because solutions would involve a complete rethinking about how police are recruited and trained, in part because community distrust of the police is so high. The distrust is partly a legacy of the earlier conflict but also a consequence of the lack of accountability for extortion and abuse.²⁵ An activist in Waringin said the anger of her neighbours was directed far more against the police for failing to prevent the violence than the Christians who torched their homes. But there is no indication that anyone in Ambon is pushing police reform or even looking more closely at procedures in place for use of lethal force and how they are applied. To this day, no one knows who fired the weapons that resulted in the gunshot deaths on 11 September except the members of the security forces themselves.

Reconciliation efforts do not seem to be reaching the grassroots, with the displaced women's lobbying group a notable exception. An activist suggested this was because the government spent more on symbols, like the "world peace gong" that was officially installed in the city by President Yudhoyono in November 2009, than on serious education efforts in city schools.²⁶ It may also be that the memories of the conflict, the physical segregation of the communities and the frequency of minor brawls serve to counteract various civil society initiatives aimed at building bridges. A resident of Air Mata Cina, where the fight took place on 12 December, said no one has attempted to heal the rift between the two sides, and the situation remained tense two months later.²⁷ There was also no attempt to apply the Waringin formula of assistance to the owners of destroyed and damaged homes in his neighbourhood.²⁸

Hardline groups continue to operate, including JAT which began to recruit in Ambon in late 2008, shortly after it was formed. Their presence does not help matters, and the tendentious reporting of events in Ambon on radical websites feeds back into the Muslim community there, strengthening among some a sense of persecution. An instructor at the State Islamic Institute said he had been sending his students around to different mosques in the city on

Fridays to gauge the temperature, and there was a perceptible increase in hostility toward Christians in many of the sermons.²⁹ The deputy mayor, who has also been trying to attend different mosques on Fridays, disagreed however, saying the militant sermons were only taking place in a few mosques.³⁰

VI. CONCLUSION

Ambon to all outward appearances is a normal, bustling city with few signs to the casual observer of trouble or trauma. But everyone is aware of the speed with which mobs can form and the consequences that can result. The elected officials are better than most, and they are determined to show Ambon at its best for the MTQ in June. But without more attention to the systemic roots of violence in Ambon – segregation, poor policing and lack of transparency in investigations, to name three – the eruption on 11 September can easily happen again.

The first is the most difficult to address but carefully thought through programs that would bring students together across communities for practical training or civic action programs might help. The policing issues – too heavy reliance on use of firearms with live bullets as a method of crowd control, poor community relations, inadequately trained recruits, failure to anticipate violence or take preventive measures based on good intelligence – are not unique to Ambon; they are problems across Indonesia and require attention in Jakarta. That said, Ambon would be a useful place to initiate a pilot project specifically focused on rapid response to civil unrest.

In terms of investigations, the government needs to give the same attention to the deaths of Darfin Saimin and Revaldo Petta, the drivers killed in September and December respectively, that it gave in 2005 to the beheadings of three schoolgirls in Poso, Central Sulawesi. The appointment of a special police task force in that instance not only solved the murder; it also found the perpetrators of dozens of violent crimes that local police had been unable to solve. If the Ambon police cannot produce results in the cases of the two cases that have generated such suspicion, it may be time for the national police commander to appoint a similar task force so that conspiracy theories can be put to rest.

²⁵ The problem is not unique to Ambon. See forthcoming (February 2012) Crisis Group Asia Report on the failure of community policing.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Muslim eyewitness, 1 February 2012.

²⁸ Ibid. He also said the neighbourhood head was caught in a blatant act of corruption after submitting a report claiming 37 houses, not five, had sustained serious damage, but a resident reported him to the police.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Muslim instructor, Ambon, 18 January 2012. For recommendations on how the Indonesian government might control incendiary speech, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°132, *From Vigilantism to Terrorism in Cirebon*. 26 January 2012, p. 12.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sam Latuconsina, deputy mayor, 21 January 2012.

Crisis Group's recommendation for an independent commission to investigate who fired the bullets into the crowd on 11 September still stands.³¹ The commission should identify the shooters; assess their training in use of firearms, if, as is generally believed, they were members of the security forces; and review why rubber bullets or blanks were not used. The findings could serve as the basis for a more comprehensive review of crowd control procedures.

The forthcoming MTQ is providing a rationale for officials to tour the city and surrounding areas, talking up the honour and economic benefits that the event, which 5,000 people from around the country are expected to attend, will bring. It could also provide the rationale for taking measures to understand why the eruptions of September and December took place, and what can be done to reduce the possibility of a recurrence.

Jakarta/Brussels 13 February 2012

³¹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Trouble Again in Ambon*, op. cit., p. 9.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF INDONESIA

