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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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● (1310)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please. We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today, November 29, 2012, we are holding our 59th meeting.

[*English*]

We are continuing to study religious freedom in Indonesia. We are joined from Washington, D.C., by John Sifton, who is the advocacy director at Human Rights Watch.

Mr. Sifton, we are glad to have you at our committee. I welcome you, and please feel free to begin your testimony.

Mr. John Sifton (Advocacy Director, Human Rights Watch): Thank you, and thank you for allowing me to testify before the committee.

The subject of your hearing today, religious intolerance in Indonesia, is a very timely one. Human Rights Watch has been working on human rights issues in Indonesia for decades, from abuses during the authoritarian Suharto era to more recent issues raised as the country has transitioned to democracy. Obviously, the country has come a long way since the Suharto era, but Indonesia today continues to be beset by several serious human rights abuses and human rights issues, of which violence, harassment, and discrimination against religious minorities is probably the most serious. The violence, harassment, discrimination, and intolerance of minorities, such as the Ahmadiyya, Bahá'í, Christian, and Shia faiths, is a problem that is now, unfortunately, growing worse.

I'd like to use my testimony to give a few accounts of recent incidents that will be of interest to the subcommittee, and then go on to answer your questions.

I'd like to start with an account of a particularly vicious attack that occurred in February of 2011 in a village called Cikeusik, in western Java. Over 1,000 Islamist militants—over 1,000 men—attacked an Ahmadiyya mosque in which a few dozen worshippers were meeting. It was a vicious mob attack. The men were armed with stones, sticks, and machetes. Some of them were shouting, "You are infidels, you are heretics" as they fell on the worshippers. By the time the attack was over, three of the Ahmadiyya were dead, bludgeoned to death, and five others were severely injured, with massive wounds to their bodies and their faces, requiring major reconstructive surgeries. One of the victims stopped by to see our Jakarta-based researcher just the other day. He's literally had tens of thousands of dollars in reconstructive surgery since the attack. His health insurance has just run out.

This is an attack that has had a huge hangover impact on that community, traumatizing many of the villagers. While this attack in west Java was more gruesome than most, it's nevertheless part of a growing trend of religious violence in Indonesia that we've been documenting over the last two or three years.

According to the Setara Institute, which is a Jakarta-based non-profit that monitors religious freedom, there were 216 cases of attacks on religious minorities two years ago, in 2010—216 cases of attacks on minorities—and in 2011 there were 244, which is a pretty big increase. Already in the first nine months of this year there have been another 214 cases. If things go on track, there will be even more incidents this year than there were last, so that will be a second year with an increase.

Many of these incidents are not violence against people, thankfully; they tend to be attacks on mosques and churches, and mostly arson attacks. But in many of the incidents, local security forces either didn't prevent the attacks, were slow to respond to them, or failed to investigate the attacks. This is a big issue I want to raise, which is the government complicity in these events. In the incident in west Java I just described, police in fact were on the scene when that mob attacked. They withdrew as the mob descended on the mosque and they let the violence occur.

In another incident, on December 20, 2011, some Sunni militants attacked a Shia village in Sampang, on Madura Island, which is a small island near Surabaya. During that attack—it was basically a pogrom—a good part of the village was burned and 500 residents were forced to flee from their burning houses. Police arrested one of the militants; there were hundreds of people and only one person was arrested.

Several months later, on August 26 of this year, at the end of Ramadan, it happened again: hundreds of Sunni militants attacked the same village and burned down another 50 houses. They killed somebody this time, and they seriously injured several others. Again, police were on the scene, but they failed to stop the attack.

The reason I raise this is that in all the research we have done—not just on the violence, but also on discrimination and other harassment, which I will talk about in a moment—there's really no question that Indonesian government entities, on the local and on the national level, are implicated in the violence, intolerance, and discrimination.

I want to stress that these problems with religious intolerance are not just about violence, however. Religious minorities are also being subjected to increasingly widespread discrimination and harassment by government authorities. For instance, religious communities face huge hurdles in overcoming bureaucratic harassment, which they face when they seek to build a new church or buy property for their religious community. They get hung up in all kinds of bureaucratic zoning ordinances and are basically refused permission to build churches.

Senior government officials—the religious affairs minister, the home affairs minister—continue to justify restrictions on religious freedom in the name of public order. They've both offered relocation to affected communities, who have either been attacked by Sunni groups or are being subjected to this bureaucratic harassment. They offer relocation, but do very little to actually protect the rights of the people who are under attack. The religious affairs minister in particular, Suryadharma Ali, has inflamed tensions by making highly discriminatory remarks about both the Ahmadiyya and the Shia at various times, suggesting that they are heretical to Islam. Ahmadiyya and Shia are both part of the Islamic faith, but the religious affairs minister suggests otherwise. In September 2012, Ali stated that the solution to religious intolerance of Shia and Ahmadiyya was for them to convert to Sunni Islam.

President Yudhoyono, in the same month, called for the development of an international instrument or entity to prosecute religious blasphemy, which of course could be used to restrict free expression and religious freedom of minorities. By far the biggest failure of the Indonesian government is simply their failure to reign in abusive forces behind all of this violence and harassment. There are extremist groups, both political groups and just literally mobs, who are fomenting the violence. The government, far from investigating or prosecuting them for threatening and carrying out violence, does nothing, and doesn't use any of the raw power they have, or the police power, or the power of the bully pulpit, so to speak, to stop the violence or prevent it from happening. That is probably the single biggest failure. The reason is it's a human rights abuse and not just a social problem.

In important respects, Indonesia is rightly touted for its religious diversity and the tolerance that is ingrained in its constitution, at least on paper. There are several bumps in the road. There are issues about atheism versus religious sentiment, which are very complicated and also bear some discussion. Among religions, among faiths, there is, on paper, an idea of diversity that is very promising. The end of the Suharto era brought greater freedoms in a general sense. The flip side of this coin has been that many ugly viewpoints—many radical, extremist viewpoints, which have either been long repressed or politically sidelined in one way or another—have now emerged into the open. The Government of Indonesia, in particular its current president, has just not dealt with the fallout of these problems. When the intolerance is expressed through harassment, intimidation, and violence, it creates a climate in which many more attacks can be expected in the future.

I could go on for a while, but with that, I will leave it and take your questions.

● (1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much for your testimony.

We have to get to another building in time for question period. For organizational reasons, we have to wrap it up without the usual leeway we have.

Saying all of that, I'm going to suggest that we allow six minutes for questions. If it looks like we're starting to run over, because six minutes has become seven, we will cut them down to five.

I will turn it over to Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

The Chair: I'll just mention, sir, before you begin, that we are televised today, so everybody just keep that in mind as you carry on.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much for that warning, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sifton, thank you very much for taking the time to join us electronically. I apologize that I was a little late. I chaired a committee beforehand, so if I ask any questions regarding the testimony you gave that seem redundant, please forgive me beforehand.

We had Irshad Manji here just a couple of days ago giving testimony, and we were, of course, talking specifically about her visit. She really said that within five years there was a radical change.

You mentioned something about religious tolerance being promising on paper, but she said there was actually an atmosphere of good religious diversity and tolerance just five years ago and there has been a substantial change. What do you equate that change to?

First, do you agree with her? Second, what is the impetus of this seemingly radical change?

● (1320)

Mr. John Sifton: It's a very complicated political science question, and to be perfectly frank, I'm not qualified to answer on the history going all the way back to 1945, when independence started. The short answer is that what you have is a country in which really extremist elements, in the political scene, mostly Sunni, in one way or another were kept under control or were sidelined or were subjugated in one way or another from 1945 until roughly five years ago.

First, the Suharto era ended, but in the fallout from that, what you saw was certain, quite extremist Sunni groups becoming more and more powerful politically, and instead of being co-opted or in some way sidelined or for political reasons softening their tone, they seem to have grown increasingly strident. Unfortunately, many of their followers seem to think that the way to get things done on the local social level is to use kinetic force, to use violence. If there is a Christian church and they don't like it, they'll burn it down.

I won't even get into the more complicated issues or the fact that some of these more extremist groups have enjoyed a kind of uneasy relationship with state security apparatus over the years. There are accounts collected by the International Crisis Group and other NGOs in which police and security and intelligence folks have admitted that essentially extremist Sunni groups were used by the police as their “attack dogs” at various moments for political reasons. That's a whole complex issue in itself, and there's a question to be asked whether the government created a monster by using radical groups to be off-the-books mobs for hire.

At the end of the day, the answer to your question is that about five years ago very extremist groups gained more political power than they've ever had. The current president's religious affairs minister, who I was just talking about, who is so hostile to Shia and Ahmadiyya, was given that position because the president has a coalition government and he needed to give him a position. It's almost like politics was the reason that guy got that position and why we have him now, and why he can't be fired by the current president, no matter how much we complain about him.

Mr. David Sweet: As Indonesia is one of the few countries that... [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...for certain, and that position could easily be used as one that could enhance tolerance, but obviously, as you said, it has been the contrary.

You mentioned specifically the Ahmadiyya and the Shia. Of all the religious minorities, are they singled out more...? I'm wondering about the Christian minority. Are they targeted as well? Are they all universally persecuted, or does there seem to be one group that's targeted more than another?

Mr. John Sifton: Demographically there is one group that's targeted more than the others, just because they're bigger and there are more targets, so to speak, and that is Christians, who make up 9% to 10% of the population. If you look at the 250-odd attacks this year, which by the end of the year will be 280 or something, a lot of them are just arson attacks on churches, but when you look at the most violent attacks, ones in which people actually got hurt and died, those tend to be Shia and Ahmadiyya.

The Ahmadiyya are a very small minority, so the raw number of attacks is quite small because the community is small, but in terms of viciousness of the attacks...they get spoken about the most rudely and the most dismissively by the government.

● (1325)

Mr. David Sweet: So there's more individual violence toward people in the Ahmadiyya and Shia communities and more property damage and wanton destruction toward the Christian community generally. I understand we're generalizing here. With human rights abuses, I don't like to generalize, but it's just to give us a picture of what's going on there.

Mr. John Sifton: There's the violence too. That's just the violence. There's also the question of harassment and how many churches have asked for permits but have been refused and things like that. It's another way of counting intolerance.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Regarding the Ahmadiyyas, I'm not sure if you know the answer, but do they attempt to proselytize and cause Sunnis to become Ahmadiyya, or are they entirely separate and not seeking to proselytize?

Mr. John Sifton: There is a lot of talk among Sunni militant groups about Christian proselytizing as a reason why they have to sort of fight back. That, to me, is not the usual argument that's made about Ahmadiyya. The usual argument about Ahmadiyya is that they're infidels and they've sullied the Koran by writing their own version, and things like that. That's the sort of complaint that gets made the most during these attacks.

The Chair: Okay, so that's the basis perhaps on which they are seen as justifying some kind of more aggressive persecution.

Mr. John Sifton: Yes. I mean, with Shia, it's the same. These radical groups consider them to be heretic Muslims, which I guess for them is worse than folks who aren't even Muslims in the first place.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go to Monsieur Jacob, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Sifton, for coming to testify before the committee and provide us with a portrait of the latest developments in the situation today.

During your presentation, you spoke of 214 attacks being committed. These incidents are mainly attacks against churches and cases of arson. These events have caused deaths and injuries. You talked about government complicity, religious intolerance, inertia in the face of violence and the deterioration of the climate.

My first question concerns the Indonesian judiciary. Does it seem to you to be independent and impartial, particularly in cases of violent attacks against religious minorities, allegations of blasphemy or discrimination on grounds of religion and beliefs? Do the judges seem to you to be free and willing to give objective decisions? Especially when the members of the Indonesian security forces are involved, can they give a decision in complete freedom, without outside interference?

[*English*]

Mr. John Sifton: There's no doubt there are some problems with judicial independence in Indonesia across the board on all issues. That's just simply a fact.

I think the bigger problem, from a legal, judicial, rule of law point of view, in relation to this problem in particular, is that police and prosecutors don't robustly investigate or prosecute the cases in the first place. When they do, they seek punishment or fines that are way below what would be reasonable to expect in some of these cases.

In the few cases that have been investigated and prosecuted, there have been punishments that are almost laughable in how small they are. I mean, they are literally time served or a fine of $200 and that sort of thing for police who have been found to have killed somebody. I think that's the bigger issue; the prosecutors don't really pursue this stuff very robustly.

One of the things I like to say when I'm there is that Human Rights Watch for a long time had a big set of issues on the human rights front with the Bush administration here in the United States about a number of issues, from Guantanamo to whatever else. One thing we can say that the Bush administration was good about was that after September 11 they set up a very robust prosecutorial unit in the Department of Justice to prosecute hate crimes against Muslims and Sikhs, because there was an uptick after the September 11 attacks.

That's the sort of thing that is completely lacking in Indonesia, the sort of concerted, focused effort to prosecute crimes of intolerance against minorities. It just doesn't exist. There's no effort to focus on that.

● (1330)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

My second question is about corruption. Is corruption a serious problem in Indonesia? You spoke earlier of favouritism, and paltry fines and sentences. What effect does corruption have on the ability of all Indonesians enjoying their civil and political rights?

[*English*]

Mr. John Sifton: One way in which corruption is directly involved in this is that the Ministry of Religious Affairs is a patronage post, but it has a lot of power over some of the ordinary administrative decisions that would impact a religious community, like permission to build a church, permission to expand a church, things like that.

The religious affairs ministry is a patronage post that was handed out by the president to somebody who is a radical extremist Sunni Muslim. Then, to make matters worse, there are all kinds of suggestions of corruption within that ministry, which, among other things, oversees the hajj to Saudi Arabia. That is a complicated thing, but basically the government helps Indonesians travel to Saudi Arabia, and bankrolls some of them, and there is a trust fund for others; there is a lot of money at stake. There is a lot of corruption in that ministry, and having it presumably puts a person in a place where they can actually reap some of the rewards, so to speak. That's one way it's directly involved in this.

On a general level, all I'd say about corruption is that it's just one more piece of evidence about the arbitrariness of the legal system, that if a radical extremist group attacks a Christian mosque, you can be pretty sure they're also going to have enough money to bribe the police to avoid prosecution afterwards.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Your six minutes are now up.

[*English*]

Now we turn to the next Conservative member, Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Sifton, for your presentation.

In August 2012, new organizations and human rights groups reported that a group of Shi'ite students and teachers were attacked by a Sunni mob, killing at least one person.

In your view, is religious strife and sectarian violence having an impact on children's rights to obtain an education in Indonesia?

Mr. John Sifton: Yes. That's the village I was discussing earlier. It had already been attacked late in 2011, and then at the end of Ramadan, some of the students in that village sought to go back to Java, to go to their schools. It was as they sought to go to their schools that they were attacked.

It's absolutely the case that Shia children face bigger hurdles getting an education because of the relentless attacks on their mosques and schools and communities. There is no doubt about it, not to mention what religious instruction takes place in churches. I haven't even gotten to churches.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Okay.

In your opinion, has rising religious intolerance had any effect on the ability of women to fully enjoy their human rights in Indonesia?

Would your assessment of the situation of women belonging to religious minorities in the country differ from your assessment of the situation of women practising one of the six official religions?

● (1335)

Mr. John Sifton: Interestingly, with women's rights you actually get into some issues that don't just have to do with religious minorities only, but even for ordinary Sunni Muslim women who may not agree with some of the more extremist viewpoints that have been exposed by these groups....

There are tens of millions of Sunni Muslims in Indonesia who don't share any of these extremist viewpoints that are being articulated during these attacks. I'd like to stress that it's not as though you have a very extremist Sunni population that is attacking everybody else. It's a sliver of the Sunni population that has sort of hijacked it.

With respect to women's rights, I think the biggest issue right now is the religious harmony bill, which is moving through the parliament. It would seek to impose all kinds of silly restrictions on social mores and on morality. There is even an idea floated to legislate the length above the knee that a woman's dress could legally be.

This sort of thing is indicative of the larger problem, not just for religious minorities but for the whole country, in allowing these extremist elements to start bossing everybody around, even though they don't represent the population as a whole.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: You mentioned Saudi Arabia earlier, and I've heard that from different witnesses. Am I drawing the conclusion that Saudi Arabia is maybe one of the big reasons behind some of the problems in Indonesia today?

Mr. John Sifton: I think that would be too simplistic. Certainly there's money coming from groups in Saudi Arabia that are more conservative. But the fact is, a lot of the groups are well funded to begin with.

Religious extremism has been bubbling up in Indonesia since 1945, well before Saudi funding sources were on the scene. But it is something to worry about, especially when groups become so well funded that they can buy elections at the local level, and things like that. You start to wonder, there's a lot of money here; what's going on?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: In your opinion, how could Canada best promote respect for the rights to freedom of religion, expression, and association in Indonesia?

Mr. John Sifton: I think every government that has an embassy in Jakarta can play a role in telling the President of Indonesia that he needs to get tough on religious extremism, and that the international community is not just going to sit here and watch as this country goes from being a reasonably tolerant Muslim democracy to one that isn't tolerant at all.

How the Canadian embassy does that in Jakarta.... There are a number of things that can be done. You can do everything from bringing other voices into Jakarta to discuss these issues, to promoting events at which different voices can be heard, to just the raw public diplomacy of calling them out, calling the government out, and calling the president out, in particular, on his failure to address this rising extremism.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Have I any time left?

The Chair: We have 15 seconds.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you very much for those answers, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go now to Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Sifton, for being with us.

You described in your testimony the increased violence, harassment, discrimination, and intolerance of religious minorities and the complicity of state entities, including security services, in this. You also spoke—not today but elsewhere—about the use of prosecutions of members of religious minorities through the blasphemy laws and the like.

This brings me to a question. Prior to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Indonesia in September, I believe you asked her to raise with the Indonesian government, as you just suggested to us through our embassies, concerns regarding the rising religious intolerance and the problematic charges that have been brought against religious minorities under blasphemy laws. Do you know what was the reaction to her making these representations to the President of Indonesia? Has there been any noticeable change since she's been there? Does that have any inferences for what we might do here in Canada?

● (1340)

Mr. John Sifton: So far, no. We have seen no evidence that the president has realized that he has to take this more seriously. Unfortunately, now we're starting to get at the tail end of his presidency, and we're going to have to start thinking about who the next president of Indonesia will be and whether that president will be able to raise these issues.

A year ago, in November of 2011, when President Obama was going to the East Asia Summit in Bali, we urged the White House to have President Obama raise these issues in his bilateral meeting with President Yudhoyono. We basically said the only person who can tell him to clamp down on this stuff is Obama, and don't miss this opportunity. Whether he did so or not, I don't know, but there's no evidence that the government has improved its record. I don't know what it's going to take.

What I would say, though, is that the efforts haven't been that strong. Perhaps Hillary Clinton raised it in the bilaterals she had with the foreign minister. Perhaps President Obama raised it in his bilaterals. But what I haven't seen are ambassadors, the United States ambassador from here in Washington or anywhere else, speaking about this very vociferously, and that's what I think is needed now.

I should also say that the UN special rapporteurs have been speaking out about this more and more. That also will play in as UN institutions, special procedures, the rapporteurs, and the Human Rights Council weigh in increasingly on this. That will also help.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You've worked in Pakistan and have a knowledge of Pakistan. A witness's testimony before our committee has made some reference that some of what is happening in Indonesia may be reflective of some of the more troubling things developing and that have been occurring in Pakistan. Do you think that analogy has a certain validity to it, and does that influence what we might be doing by way of a response as well?

Mr. John Sifton: Yes, absolutely, the parallels are actually quite frightening, especially with Ahmadiyya, who face huge problems in Pakistan. Pakistan has a far worse problem with sectarian violence against Shia, and Hazara Shia, in particular, than Indonesia does, and that's something we're researching right now in fact.

The good news with Pakistan, at least, is that you have security forces in the military that would probably be more prepared to crack down on some of the sectarian violence than the President of Indonesia is.

One senior official in the White House said to me that the problem is that the man does not have a spine, and I think that pretty much sums it up. He does not have the political spine to take on these extremist groups and do what needs to be done to stop the worst effects of their hatred from blossoming into actual violence.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: When you mention about Human Rights Watch and yourself having asked the President and the Secretary of State to raise these concerns with the President of Indonesia—and you're not sure whether they were or were not raised—if they were raised, it would have been done in the way of private diplomacy. Do you think we need more public diplomacy, so that not only are these things raised, but it is known that they were raised, and therefore we would have some sense of what was the response when they were raised?

Mr. John Sifton: That's exactly right on point. That's always our preference, for publicly raised concerns. The President was recently in Cambodia, which is a country with huge human rights problems, and he raised issues behind the scenes, but not publicly, and that's the kind of thing where we say that's a huge missed opportunity. You have to speak out while you're there.

Will President Obama visit Indonesia again during his presidency? I believe he will, and we will be urging him to use that occasion to revisit the issue of tolerance. When he first visited in 2010, he spoke about religious tolerance, but that was before the worst stuff had really picked up. I think it's time for him to go back and say we have a serious problem here; we're very concerned about what's going on here.

That's the United States. As for other countries, absolutely. Private concerns only go so far. What you need is a crescendo of voices in the embassies saying we're very concerned. For Canada, in particular, to have one of its citizens be subjected to mob violence, as you heard about earlier this week, is an especially vibrant point, to say, look, we have a visiting citizen who's been subjected to this type of mob violence; it's outrageous.

● (1345)

The Chair: That brings us to the end.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you, Mr. Sifton.

The Chair: We now go to Ms. Grewal, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Sifton, for your time and your presentation.

The Indonesian authorities have laws on criminal defamation to prosecute members of religious minorities in violation of their basic rights. One member of a minority group now facing criminal trial under these laws is Alexander Aan, a civil servant alleged to be an atheist. He was arrested in January and is on trial for blasphemy and inciting public unrest, which of course carries a penalty of up to almost six years in prison.

The specific charges against him relate to posts he made on a Facebook account. These criminal defamation laws allow the abuse of powerful people over the religious freedoms of citizens.

Mr. Sifton, if one recourse of action is to repeal these laws, what would you suggest is the most effective way to do this? Is this a matter that will be more effective if spearheaded internally by Indonesian citizens themselves, or is this an area in which the international community can help in some way?

Mr. John Sifton: I'm glad you brought up this other point, because the prosecution of people for blasphemy is another big problem we've been following.

In the case you've just mentioned of Alexander Aan, he was actually sentenced to 30 months in prison in June, and I think he was fined 100 million rupiah, which is a little more than $10,000. This is just one of the latest.

I think in March, Andreas Guntur was charged with blasphemy because of improperly teaching the Koran. In July, a Shia cleric was sentence to two years in prison. It's getting worse and worse. Regularly there are these attacks.

The first case you mentioned is a case of atheism, which raises some of the concerns we talked about earlier. It's one thing to be a religious minority, or a supposedly heretical Muslim, but the actual embrace of atheism is not accepted under the legal framework. I mean, you're supposed to sort of pick one of the six religions. That is a problem we have raised in the past, but that will require long-term social analysis and reflection and digestion of the Indonesian constitution. Long term, they ought to ask if this is the constitution they want, or do they have to think about a new direction?

How can the international community foment that? I think simply by encouraging Indonesian legal and religious scholars to interchange with others in other countries, from Turkey to Canada. Its learning from other countries: here's why we have a blasphemy law that has no criminal punishment, or here's why we don't have a blasphemy law—explaining why we don't like blasphemy laws, not because we don't respect religion, but because we worry that it gets used to silence dissent and it's used for illegitimate reasons.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: The Indonesian province of Aceh has enacted a law that allows the implementation of sharia law. Three laws have been passed since 2003 in Aceh based on its interpretation of sharia law. How has the application of sharia law impacted non-Muslims living in the province of Aceh? Could you say something about that?

● (1350)

Mr. John Sifton: I haven't discussed Aceh at all in my testimony because it's such a complex issue, and it's kind of a tangent issue. The complicity there is much more at the local level. The local autonomous government of that region has some serious problems with accepting and utilizing sharia law.

Human Rights Watch wrote a report about this, which is on our website, about the application of sharia law in Aceh. It's obviously very problematic, but it's a little more complicated to bring in the central government and make them complicit with that, because after all, they really did give that local government all the autonomy of self-government. Our problem, our fight, so to speak, as a human rights group, is really with that government of Aceh, not with the central government.

That said, there's a lot that can be encouraged, such as conditions for aid in that area, to tell that local government that we're very dissatisfied with what they're doing. International groups, international funders, donors, governments, can make their displeasure known with that situation in Aceh.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: The Wahid Institute is a Jakarta-based organization that monitors human rights in Indonesia. It has reported an almost 70% increase in government-instigated violations of religious freedom between 2010 and 2011. What would you say accounts for the largest percentage of cases involving government-instigated violations?

Mr. John Sifton: I think a lot of them are just simply these cases of searches, or seeking permission to build a new building. Other cases are situations where people have run afoul of the law because they have government-issued IDs from before that say they're one religion when in fact they're another, or it says they're Sunni but in fact they're Shia.

The focus on the violence makes sense because violence is very serious. The thing that religious minorities are facing day to day is just an onslaught of discrimination and harassment by government authorities.

If you have a church south of Jakarta and you want to expand to a bigger building—you buy a property across town and you want to sell your church to move there—all of a sudden, they tell you that you can't get the permit, you're not allowed to have a church there, and there's all this paperwork. This huge bureaucratic ton of bricks comes down on your head.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have reported that some—

The Chair: I have to stop you. We're actually over your time by more than a minute.

We have to go now to Mr. Marston, who will be our last questioner.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, sir. We're pleased to have you here.

Do you feel that this administration is giving serious consideration to the issues raised in the recent UN periodic review?

Mr. John Sifton: Well, they certainly responded to it earnestly.

But on this particular issue of religious violence, I don't think they understand what they really need to do to address the problems. That's my short answer.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's fine.

The witness testimony here has left me believing, at least, that there's a reasonable constitution in place; it's just that they're backing away from the use and enforcement or the provisions of the constitution. If that's the case, it would lead me to believe that something systemic is happening within this country, something very significant to back the people away. We watch other Arab countries who are fighting dramatically to get new constitutions and to get change, yet here it's almost like the constitution is an inconvenience.

I raised with a witness yesterday how much of that might be the people in power in Indonesia doing those things to sustain their power, thus allowing some of the abuses. Perhaps that might be one of the reasons that they're not confronting it as they should.

● (1355)

Mr. John Sifton: The motives for some of these extremist groups sometimes escape us. I gather that, as it's been for centuries, sometimes it's easier to campaign on hate than on ideas of how to bring your country forward. Certainly it's easy to just campaign on religious purity, making Indonesia religiously pure again, and things like that. It's very easy to campaign on that as a group, versus campaigning on more complex issues, like how to build a better health care system, or whatever.

Mr. Wayne Marston: In my office, discussing it with my staff earlier, we were wondering if inter-ethnic conflict might have a play in this. We tend to go towards religion because there is that component, but I'm thinking of Aceh province and west Papua, and I'm just wondering how you would comment on that.

Mr. John Sifton: Well, Papua is a whole separate ball of wax, because there it's predominantly a Christian population. But their problem is that many of them seek to be independent of Indonesia altogether, and they face massive ethnic discrimination as Papuans.

It's important to recognize that there are a lot of ethnic issues in Indonesia, but the problems we're talking about with these radical extremist groups attacking minorities are almost entirely based on religion. Roughly 80% of all the attacks that you're seeing are taking place on the two islands of Java and Sumatra, the main populated parts. Way out in the east, the Moluccas, Papua, and so on, there are a lot of Christians out there. Are they getting attacked the way they are in Java? No. There are ethnic problems, but....

So it's really that in Java, at the centre of the political life of Indonesia, there are these radical groups that have decided to be hateful and are using it for political gain. As a result, religious minorities in those places, which are predominantly Muslim, much more than in the east, are getting attacked.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I raised this yesterday: it's Muslims attacking Muslims, just the two different groups.

The troubling part, of course, and it's been part of the dialogue going around this table today, is how the authorities are not using existing law and enforcing it to prevent it.

Do you have any sense, numbers-wise, of the percentage of the population...? We're talking about thugs here, in the normal terminology we'd use. You've got your mainstream Muslim religion, you've got your mainstream people, and then you've got the ones who take it to this kind of an extreme. Is there any sense of what percentage the extremists are in this particular area?

Mr. John Sifton: It's a minority. That much is clear. You just walk around Java and you can see that it is not a particularly conservative place. It's not like walking around Quetta, Pakistan, or Kandahar, Afghanistan. It's certainly the case that extremist views, Salifist views, radical or extremist Sunni views, are not the majority opinion of most Sunnis in Indonesia.

It's not just a couple of people either. These are large, well-funded, very extremist groups that have increasing amounts of political power. So while they're not the majority, they're also not insignificant. It's not just a couple of thugs; it's actually some very disturbing and very powerful political parties with quite a lot of people behind them.

Mr. Wayne Marston: They are very organized, is what you're saying.

Mr. John Sifton: Some of these groups have historical legacies going all the way back to the Japanese occupation, so it's long in the making.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

Mr. John Sifton: Extremism is not a new problem.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Marston.

Thank you to our witness.

We're about to wrap up here. We have a bus waiting, by the way, to take you back to Parliament Hill in time for question period.

I wonder if you'd just indulge me in asking a question or two.

I was thinking about the thoughts you had with regard to the nature of the violence, and of course this is an obvious thought, but it had not crossed my mind until you said it. Indonesia is, of course, an archipelago. It's in the nature of an archipelago that one cannot simply pick up and wander from one island to the next, if one doesn't have means. That does suggest that this would primarily be intra-ethnic rather than inter-ethnic. Java and Sumatra are both very large islands. Although Java is smaller, it is enormously populous. Are those two islands ethnically homogenous, or are they ethnically heterogeneous?

In the case of Sumatra, I'm also thinking about the settler issue, people coming over from Java to settle there. Does that have any relationship at all, not just to violence in general, but to violence that purports to be religious?

● (1400)

Mr. John Sifton: There are a few things you could say about the alleged Christianization that is waved out as a red flag by some of the Sunni militant groups. One does need to wonder why the Christian faith is growing in Indonesia. It is. It has gone from 8% to roughly 10%. I don't know exactly what the latest numbers are, but there has been a growth of approximately 2%.

The Chair: Does an increased birth rate explain that?

Mr. John Sifton: You can say a lot of things. Part of it is proselytization by these groups, but either way, it doesn't matter; people are entitled to proselytize. It's free speech, but it's used as a red flag by groups saying, “Oh, you know, if things keep going, Sunni Islam is going to be defeated.” That gets flagged, and part of that is movement. You have people moving into Java for the jobs or to urban centres. In urban centres there is more ethnic diversity, so, yes, you do have it, but if you go up to Sumatra, you're not going to find many Christians up there.

The Chair: Right.

Just thinking further, going back many decades now to the 1950s, there actually was a Christian separatist movement, was there not, in the Moluccas?

Mr. John Sifton: The Moluccas and Papua both.... They don't define themselves as Christian. It's a separatist movement, but I don't think it's religiously defined.

The Chair: Oh, it's ethnically defined then.

Mr. John Sifton: Yes, for Papuans, the Christian aspect of it is not the first thing on the lips of the....

The Chair: Right. At any rate, I was thinking of the Moluccas, actually, the Maluku Islands, but that's not a centre of this violence anyway, is it?

Mr. John Sifton: No. There are a lot of problems in the Moluccas, and there have been some isolated incidents, but if you look at the raw numbers of attacks, they tend to be more in Java and Sumatra.

The Chair: I have one last question.

Looking beyond Indonesia—and perhaps this is an unfair question. If it is, you're free to just say that it's outside your area of expertise. One of the things that has struck me as we've had hearings of various sorts over the past few years—we've looked at Iran, for example, and Iraq, and a number of other countries. I am struck by the thought that the majority of persecution of Muslims in the world would seem to be at the hands of other people who are Muslims, different sects or different streams. I don't know if that's a fair thought.

There seems to be some kind of systemic problem.... That's not a fair way of putting it. There seems to be some kind of phenomenon going on that is in existence.

When I think about it, that's not even a question. That's just a kind of comment I throw out, but do you have any comment back on that?

I guess what I'm really asking is this. Are Indonesia's problems parochial to Indonesia, or are they part of a wider problem that we should be thinking about?

Mr. John Sifton: It very much is a wider problem.

Afghanistan has problems with Shia groups facing discrimination in certain local areas. It's much more homogenous, though.

Pakistan, which is almost entirely Sunni, minority Shia, has huge problems.

Iran is terrible with respect to the small number of Sunnis it has.

The Bahá'í, who we haven't talked about at all here, is a very small population. The Bahá'í of Indonesia are facing a lot of problems with these groups as well, but the Bahá'í face far worse problems in Iran and Egypt than they do in Indonesia. Just today, the Egyptians are debating their constitution, and there are a lot of issues they have to sort out as well.

This is by no means just Indonesia. This is a problem you see in all of these countries, which have Shia, Sunni, and a small number of other faiths, such as Bahá'í, Hindus, and Sikhs.

● (1405)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, we do have to end here due to some time constraints we face. We're very grateful that you were able to attend, and I think all of us found your testimony to be very useful indeed.

Thank you very much.

Mr. John Sifton: Thank you.

The Chair: Colleagues, I'll adjourn the meeting.

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