

Letter From Indonesia

by Doug Bandow

Modern Religious Wars



The weathered boatman peered out at the three Westerners as we climbed into a small water taxi to cross the bay from the city of Ambon to the airport. "You're from America? Send us arms. The Muslims are bad." He used his hands to indicate a rifle as we pulled away from shore.

Ambon, the provincial capital of the Moluccas, or Spice Islands, is now largely quiet. The city is blanketed with police and military units, which have suppressed most intercommunal violence. The remains of war are present everywhere, however. A few blocks from our hotel, street barricades separate Christian and Muslim sections of town.

You venture into enemy territory at your peril. While returning from Muslim territory, our interpreter, a Christian hotel manager named Theny Barlola, mentioned that it was the first time he had been in that area in three years. He initially hesitated to accompany us, exclaiming: "If I go, they will kill me, they will take me away." But he relented when the Muslim authorities sent a van for us.

Between the sections lie several blocks of no man's land, ruined buildings that once housed Christians and Muslims, as well as a thriving Chinese business district. The remains of gutted two- and three-story buildings stand as silent sentinels. Bits of wall surround the debris of war: rusty corrugated roofing, dented dishes, skeletons of sewing machines, burned motorbikes, bent bed frames, weathered chairs, shattered bricks.

Many people, especially in outlying villages, have ended up in refugee camps. They rely on outside organizations for help—for instance, Christian Freedom International (CFI), which has provided construction tools and fishing equipment. Others have come back to live in neighboring homes that were only damaged. A few businesses have reopened, but the large bank building at the corner

sits vacant. A makeshift wooden cross marks the spot where a church once sat.

Although the city is generally quiet, the terror of mob murder hangs in the shadows. Barlola, a bright, well-dressed 35-year-old, describes the mood last year as one of "panic." For a time, he considered heading for the mountains.

So did C.J. Boehm, a Dutch missionary who has spent more than 30 years in Indonesia. He works at the crisis center of the diocese of Amboina, which sits next to a Catholic church on a busy street in the Christian section of town. When violence engulfed the city last June, Boehm and 235 frightened parishioners packed their bags and were ready to flee. "There was only one escape route," he said—a narrow road up into the hills. They did not have to use it: In this case, the police and military did their jobs, and the Muslim warriors never came.

With an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 people dead and as many as 500,000 refugees created since January 1999, war-weariness pervades the Moluccas. Both sides speak of reconciliation, but the two communities remain far apart.

Economic stagnation hangs over the city. Haddi Abdullah Soulisa, the 80-year-old head of Ambon's Muslim community, complains: "There is 'no school, no work, people are hungry in their belly. How do you then do reconciliation?'"

Economic development was a casualty of the conflict. Muslim mobs targeted businesses owned by ethnic Chinese. "Most of the traders here were Chinese," says Boehm. "Almost all have left."

Violence is pandemic throughout this polyglot nation. What distinguishes the fighting in the Moluccas is that it grew out of the Muslim-Christian tensions that pervade Indonesia. As military spokesman Craitto Usodo, a rear air marshal, explains, "the case in Molucca is far different from those in other parts of the country since it involves religious matters."

The first round of violence grew out of a spat in January 1999 between a bus driver and passenger. Many who lived on the islands quickly lost their taste for killing. Then the fighting took on a larger—and more ominous—religious dimension. Upward of 4,500 fighters of the Laskar Jihad, or "Holy Warrior Troops," flocked to the island.

In January 2000, more than 80,000 Muslims marched in Jakarta to demand a *jihad*, or holy war, against Christians; parliament speaker Amien Rais, originally a member of the governing coalition, appeared at the rally, announcing that "Our patience has limits." The Moluccas became a cause for Muslims; Christians told me that they have identified fighters from Afghanistan, Moro Islands (the Philippines), Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The Laskar Jihad played a particularly important role.

As a result, religious sites have been targeted for attack, with some 400 churches destroyed. Human casualties include not only dead and wounded, but forced conversions (principally to Islam) and coercive male and female circumcision. Moreover, Jaffar Umar Thalib, head of the Jihad forces, has formally called for the imposition of "Syariat Islam," or Islamic law, at least in areas cleared of Christians.

Religion also split the security forces. Muslim attacks on Christians in the Moluccas coincided with the collapse of the central government's authority. Even after violence erupted in the Moluccas, however, Christians were able to defend themselves. But then the Muslims gained the backing not only of the Laskar Jihad forces, but of many soldiers.

"In most cases, individuals, and in some cases whole units, because they were afraid, or cowards, did nothing," says Boehm. Some simply stood by while Jihad forces arrived. "The military hasn't done anything," complained one Christian leader, who insisted on anonymity, in an interview last year. In his view (and that of several others), the Jihad couldn't have entered the Moluccas without the military's complicity. Other soldiers turned over their weapons to Muslims. Finally, "some were among the attackers," says Boehm.

Although Muslims appeared to be the chief beneficiaries of outside intervention, some police were more inclined to help the Christians. There were even clashes between military and police. Gradually, the security forces seem to be moving back to neutrality. Unfortunately, sporadic fighting continues, and further killing could flare up at any time. Both sides continue to prepare for war. Although the violence has receded, the

Laskar Jihad is one of the most important stumbling blocks. "They are still around, but how many, where they are, we don't know," says Boehm.

They were likely involved in an attack in late February on the western part of the island of Seram, in which a Christian village was sacked for the third time. "There was hardly anything left to be burned, but they did so," observes Boehm. Naturally, Christians demand the Jihad's removal. "Without Laskar Jihad, we can have reconciliation," argues Agus Wattimena, the head of a local Christian militia.

In contrast, Haddi Soulisa defends the Jihad: They "come to help Muslims," he said, and "not only for war." They bring doctors, help repair burned houses, and more. His response is disingenuous, but it reflects genuine fear within the Muslim community. Even Agus understands the Muslim reluctance to see Jihad forces leave. Still, Agus, a Baptist in a long line of Baptists, sees no reason to trust the other side. "Christians and Muslims are talking about reconciliation. Okay, but the Muslims fight and shoot Christians. Until today, we don't believe they mean it."

There is no Christian equivalent of the Jihad, "no people from outside," says Boehm. Instead, "in matter of war there are Christian militias," which are "only local, organized spontaneously to resist." Their presence is obvious: They have a well-fortified camp on a major road down from a military base.

During the worst of the conflict, Agus, who looks a bit like an aging biker, fought Muslims every day. He claims he acted only when Christians were under attack. "We don't have desire for war with Muslims, but only to protect our area. If Muslims come for war, we will fight." But, he adds, "we don't want to fight again."

His militia relies primarily on home-made weapons, supplemented by purchases when possible. In fact, he solicited funds from his three visitors to help him buy guns: "Only to protect Christians. Not to go to war. We must be ready. We need help, money."

Muslims understandably have a different view of his activities, and there have been Christian as well as Muslim atrocities. But the bulk of the blame falls on the Muslim side. While Boehm doesn't claim all Christians have been in the right, he argues: "Christians haven't done any attacking over the last half-year. Only the Muslims. The Christians say they

have had enough."

Unfortunately, explains Pastor Boehm, the communities "are quite divided [among] themselves." Muslim factions have squabbled violently. Some favor reconciliation, and some don't. Thus, it is "hard to make peace with the Muslims, since one agrees, but one says no," says Boehm.

Haddi Soulisa acknowledges the problem, but contends that it is "the same, Christian and Muslim, all the same. Many, many want to make reconciliation. Many groups say no [to] reconciliation because there has been conflict for a long time, with too much damage done."

Few Christians or Muslims credit the central government. Haddi Soulisa is dismissive: Jakarta "does nothing. Nothing," he spits out. The authorities are corrupt and dishonest; there is no rule of law. Agus doesn't believe Jakarta can or will solve the problem. "We need peacekeeping from the U.N. to come to Ambon to promote real reconciliation."

Few had put much hope in former President Wahid Abdurrahman, whose hold on both reality and power grew increasingly tenuous over the past year. "I think we can trust Gus Dur to have good intentions," said Boehm. "But there are those in the military who regret that they lost control of the government." Very common among Christians with whom I've spoken is the belief that a variety of forces are using religious tensions to undermine the central government and promote Islamic rule.

Many Christians want the army to leave the Moluccas; they remember its intervention on behalf of Muslims. They, like Agus, disclaim any desire for revenge. When asked if Christians would go on a rampage without the military present, Father Boehm replied: "I don't know. I don't think so. I think Christians have sincere aspirations to come to peace. But I don't know what the grassroots think after so much suffering."

Despite sporadic outbursts, "the situation has calmed down. Refugees have started to come back," says Boehm. A returning doctor and his wife and toddler shared my flight into Ambon.

They Barlola seemed moved by his time with Haddi Soulisa, who in turn pointed at Barlola during our meeting: "There is reconciliation here." Yet the street barricades stand for a reason: "If a Christian goes into a Muslim neighborhood, he will get beat up," contended Boehm. Most cabs, particularly the plentiful pedicabs, stick to their own section

of town. Speedboats are the preferred mode of transportation to avoid hostile sections of town.

Barlola notes that the Christian community was busy last year, signing petitions and mailing letters asking for outside help. Most Christians wanted foreign peacekeepers or, failing that, evacuation. Indeed, my meeting with Christian leaders last July was filled with demands that the international community in general—and the United States in particular—do something, though there was little agreement on *what* it should do. Most, at least, wanted Washington to pressure the central government to discipline military forces that were backing the Muslims.

Jakarta naturally resisted any outside involvement, and Muslims were even less enthusiastic. Haddi Soulisa was polite but blunt when it came to the United States. No, he didn't believe any outside government could help: "The U.S. shouldn't police the world. Give us time for Indonesia to make it by ourselves. Democracy, Indonesian democracy, not by any country imposing it on Indonesia."

But Indonesian democracy may not survive. The current respite in Ambon may only be temporary. "Now we are in round five or maybe round six. We finish one, have reconciliation, then it starts again," observes Barlola. The next bout could come at any time, and there will be more deaths, more destruction, more refugees, more promises from Jakarta, and more hand-wringing from abroad.

"Don't forget us," pleads Agus. "We are a brotherhood. Go back to America, and tell Christians that they must help us here." But any help will be too late for Agus, who was shot and killed shortly after I interviewed him. And there's precious little America can do for anyone else. The U.S. government can't invade; American Christians can't run guns. That leaves relief groups like CFI to try to help clean up the mess.

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Letter From Louisiana

by Chris Segura

The Peculiar Institution



A selectively historical motion picture about a 19th-century rebellion aboard a cruel Spanish slave ship rakes in megabucks as a result of media hype, including the notation that white production assistants were forbidden to put the stage-chains on the black actors aboard the replica vessel. No one mentioned that the original chains were first put around black ankles and black wrists by black slave-traders or that the leader of the featured revolt is thought by historians to have entered the slave trade himself after his repatriation to Sierra Leone.

The Bush administration threatens to boycott the U.N.-sponsored World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, because of scheduled consideration of reparations for slavery in the United States, and then walks out because of Arab attempts to define Zionism as racism.

The U.S. government faces mounting global criticism for supporting reparations for victims of Nazi genocide against European Jews and apologizing for internment of Japanese-Americans at home while officially ignoring suits for compensation by former “comfort women” forced into sexual slavery by Japanese occupiers of Asia, all during World War II.

Thumbing their political nose at the United States, the Dutch are building a new international war-crimes court at the Hague to try such defendants as Slobodan Milosevic for ethnic atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. The Bush administration is concerned that the 1998 treaty establishing the court could be used to try U.S. soldiers and governmental officials in foreign courts.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, founded by Martin Luther King, Jr., at the beginning of the U.S. civil-rights movement, announced in August that it is attempting to end racial profiling and seeking reparations for slavery. In panel discussions, members of the group said that blacks still suffer from the

racism of the nation’s past and that they would try to fix the nation’s lingering inequities.

Closer to home—if you live in southwest Louisiana—Cajun attorney and president of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana Warren Perrin continues to petition Queen Elizabeth of England to apologize for the 18th-century deportations of Acadians from what are now the Maritime Provinces of Canada. And yes, at breakfast discussions in bayou-country kitchens, the notion of reparations also surfaces like the snout of an alligator poking through coffee-colored water.

The race card is being played everywhere. Practically no one on the face of the earth is invulnerable to accusations of racially motivated thoughts and actions. History was slanted one way for so long that it is actually dangerous to take a balanced look at any unpleasant moment in the past.

Meanwhile, amidst all of this turmoil, the sleepy little town of St. Martinville, Louisiana, sponsors—of all things—a politically incorrect witness to its own cultural heritage. The African-American Museum, which opened on Bayou Teche this summer, dares to suggest that slavery wasn’t as bad as we have been led to believe—at least not here.

The concept is certain to be debated. If it is even basically true, however, then it suggests that what Barry Goldwater said in 1964—that racism has to be resolved in the human heart—was already being accomplished in a backwater Louisiana bayou town.

At first glance, one might think that the messenger should watch out for concealed ideological weapons. In fact, the reverse is true. The St. Martinville City Council (two of the five council members are black, the mayor is white) unanimously approved the African-American Museum only after carefully scrutinizing the historical facts and deciding that the message would fly in the local political arena.

Initially, according to Mayor Eric Martin, the council members had said, “Are you crazy? The single most sensitive story in the South?” By ignoring this episode of American history, however, we might overlook important evidence of racial harmony. Interracial marriage, for instance, was not uncommon in some of the Gulf South colonies in the earliest years, though Louisiana law and custom forbade the practice. Biracial couples

“jumped the broomstick” (a marriage ceremony of Celtic origin, not African). Evidence refutes the conventional assertion that all of these black/white sexual unions were tantamount to rape.

The Roman Catholic Church kept—and, until recent years, suppressed—baptismal records listing parents of different races, and many blacks in Louisiana have now traced their ancestry back to pre-expulsion Acadia and imperial France. Historically, information at the museum explains, the products of these interracial relationships made up a third class in the local society, a sort of buffer caste between whites and blacks called “Creole.”

The word has many definitions. The Oxford English Dictionary lists its origin as French, derivative of the Spanish *criollo*, meaning “native to the locality; believed to be a colonial corruption of *criadillo*, diminutive *criado*, bred, brought up, reared, domestic.”

The definition in the OED traces the word’s root to the Latin

creare—to create. According to some 18th century writers originally applied by South American Negroes to their own children born in America as distinguished from Negroes freshly imported from Africa.

It is also applied to “Spaniards born in the West Indies,” according to the definition. Farther down, the definition reads:

A person born and naturalized in the country but of European (usually Spanish or French) or of African Negro race: the name having no connotation of color, and its reference to origin being distinguished on the one hand from being born in Europe (or Africa) and on the other hand from aboriginal.

Still farther down, the OED definition states the word “now usually [means] a creole white, a descendant of European settlers, born or naturalized in those colonies or regions, and more or less modified in type by the climate and surroundings.” Near the end, the explanation reads, “now chiefly applied to the native whites in the W. Indies, the native French population in Louisiana, Mauritius, etc.”

The word’s definition is still controversial in Louisiana, but, for the most part, it is used to identify black music and cuisine or people of African derivation who