Indonesia

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Query:

What is the current situation regarding the treatment of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia?

Response:

SUMMARY

Experts say that although conditions for ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have improved considerably since 1998, when a wave of arson attacks in Jakarta and other major cities leveled many Sino-Indonesian businesses, ethnic Chinese fear that they will be targeted again if the Southeast Asian country goes through another deep economic crisis.

Long vulnerable as a tiny but prominent minority in a sometimes volatile nation, ethnic Chinese Indonesians currently may face isolated threats and harassment, in some cases related to religion or business matters, observers say. There is little appearance, however, of the sort of organized attacks that targeted the Sino-Indonesian community in the mid- and late-1990s, peaking with large-scale anti-Chinese riots just days before former president Suharto was ousted in May 1998. Moreover, ethnic Chinese, many of whom are Christian, generally have not been targeted in recent sectarian violence that has wracked

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the Moluccas and other parts of the archipelago.

While some official discrimination against ethnic Chinese persists, the Government of Indonesia has lifted many cultural restrictions from the Suharto era. President Megawati Sukarnoputri is widely seen as tolerant of racial and religious differences in this Muslim majority country, the world's fourth most populous. However, the huge economic and political challenges facing Indonesia and the vulnerability of the Chinese during previous crises have instilled a sense of wariness in many ethnic Chinese.

BACKGROUND

"Since the fall of Suharto, there has been almost no violence directed against ethnic Chinese," according to a U.S. State Department desk officer for Indonesia (30 Apr 2002). The desk officer said that Suharto's authoritarian regime engineered much of the violence in 1998 to deflect attention from Indonesia's deep economic and political troubles. "In terms of their being a persecuted minority, it's in the past" (USDOS 30 Apr 2002).

Experts note that sporadic attacks on individual Indonesians of Chinese descent have long been an unfortunate staple of life in the archipelago (USDOS 30 Apr 2002; Indonesia specialist 22 Apr 2002). "I wouldn't say that isolated incidents do not happen, but that would be 'normal' violence" compared to the upsurge in 1998, according to a professor at a prominent American university who specializes in Indonesia (Indonesia specialist 22 Apr 2002). The professor noted that there is no evidence that ethnic Chinese are being targeted systematically as they were in 1998, when mobs torched Chinese shops and homes in several major cities and many ethnic Chinese women were raped (22 Apr 2002).

"What happened in 1998 was unusual. It took place in a particular historical moment – the overthrow of Suharto, a breakdown in public law and order," (Indonesia specialist 22 Apr 2002).

However, several ethnic Chinese in rural areas the professor visited in 2000 reported that they are concerned for their safety. "If you talk to ethnic Chinese shopkeepers in remote regions you find that they are afraid of the locals," the professor said (22 Apr 2002). At the same time, the professor noted, many ethnic Chinese in small towns who express fear are unable to say exactly who would target them or why. "Unless something is happening, you don't get chopped in the night for nothing," she said (22 Apr 2002). In any case, most ethnic Chinese live in or near major urban and trading centers rather than in rural areas (USDOS Oct 2001).

Observers suggest that incidents of harassment of ethnic Chinese could be linked to economics as well as race (Indonesia specialist 22 Apr 2002; Political scientist 16 May 2002; USDOS Mar 2002). While ethnic Chinese businessmen run many of Indonesia's largest conglomerates, most Sino-Indonesians are small shopkeepers or traders.

Inevitably, some find themselves at the center of local business disputes (Indonesia specialist 22 Apr 2002). Similarly, the U.S. State Department's latest annual report on human rights in Indonesia noted that "land disputes are a frequent source of racial and ethnic tension because the developers are frequently ethnic Chinese" (Mar 2002).

The State Department Indonesia desk officer interviewed by the RIC stated that, during periods of labor strife, workers sometimes threaten factory owners. The desk officer added, however, that these kinds of threats are directed at indigenous Indonesian as well as ethnic Chinese owners (30 Apr 2002).

A political scientist at Ohio State University (OSU) says that at least some harassment of ethnic Chinese is related to frustration over their economic position, even if most are perhaps only marginally better off than the average Indonesian. "Ordinary Indonesians have the perception that ethnic Chinese have all the assets in society" (Political scientist 16 May 2002). Ethnic Chinese make up only around 3 percent of Indonesia's population of 203 million but control almost three-quarters of the country's wealth (USDOS 2001; Menon Oct 2001).

Because ethnic Chinese are vulnerable both as a successful trading class and as a racial minority, "Chinese communities pay police and militia quite high levels of protection money," according to an Amnesty International researcher on Indonesia (AI 2 May 2002).

The U.S. Department of State's annual report on religious freedom for 2001 states that most ethnic Chinese Indonesians are also religious minorities, with many city dwellers practicing Christianity or combining Christianity with Buddhism or Confucianism (USDOS Oct 2001). In recent years, dozens of churches in Indonesia have been attacked and in some cases destroyed, mainly in the Moluccas but also in Java, Sumatra, Lombok, and Sulawesi. The report also says that unknown terrorists bombed or attempted to bomb 34 churches in 10 cities in December 2000 (Oct 2001). Assessing overall trends in religious freedom, the report states that, "[r]eligious intolerance, especially on the part of extremist Muslims towards religious minorities, including Christians, increasingly was evident" between July 2000 and June 2001, the period covered by the report (Oct 2001).

Underscoring the complicated interplay between race, religion, and wealth in Indonesia, the State Department annual human rights report said that "[a]ttacks on places of worship reflect religious tensions, but other contributing factors reflect underlying socioeconomic and political tensions between poor Muslims and more affluent Sino-Indonesian Christians" (Mar 2002).

At the same time, data from Indonesia's 1990 census suggest that the majority of Christians are indigenous Indonesians rather than ethnic Chinese. According to the census, 9.6 percent of Indonesians described themselves as Protestant or Catholic, a figure that is roughly triple the percentage of ethnic Chinese in the country (USDOS Oct

2001).

Observers say that ethnic Chinese generally have not been targeted in the violence between Muslim and Christian communities on Ambon and other parts of the Moluccan chain in eastern Indonesia (AI 2 May 2002; Indonesia specialist 22 Apr 2002).

Anecdotal reports suggest, however, that ethnic Chinese have been caught up in at least some sectarian violence. During three days of rioting in January 2000 on Lombok, a small island just east of Bali in central Indonesia, Muslim mobs attacked ethnic Chinese, looted and destroyed homes and shops, and burned 11 churches (DP 22 Jan 2000).

The relatively few Sino-Indonesians whose wealth gives them mobility are signaling both that they have continuing safety concerns and that conditions for ethnic Chinese are improving. Prominent Sino-Indonesians estimate that roughly half of the ethnic Chinese men who relocated to Singapore, Australia, the United States, or other countries in the wake of the 1998 riots occasionally make brief visits to their homes to protect their remaining business interests. Most, however, keep their families and the bulk of their capital offshore or in other parts of Indonesia (Mar 2002).

However, leading ethnic Chinese businessmen such as Sofyan Wanandi, of the Gemala Group conglomerate based in Indonesia, told Singapore's THE STRAITS TIMES newspaper recently that the Gemala Group is confident that President Sukarnoputri's government is committed to protecting ethnic Chinese interests. He and other businessmen interviewed by THE TIMES stated that the situation in Indonesia was now stable enough for ethnic Chinese to bring back some of the estimated $20 billion that was moved offshore in the midst of the 1998 attacks (Go 9 Mar 2002).

An ethnic Chinese Indonesian business consultant whose clients include large Chinese-owned conglomerates reports that local Indonesian Chinese money has started flowing back into the country (Indonesia specialist 8 May 2002). Similarly, Mohammad Sadli, an economist at the University of Indonesia and former Indonesian cabinet minister, told THE FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW of Hong Kong in January 2002 that many ethnic Chinese feel the situation has improved and are once again investing in Indonesia (Dhume 10 Jan 2002).

Indonesia experts interviewed by the RIC believe that ethnic Chinese are testing the waters, interested in rebuilding their lives in what they hope is a reformed Indonesia, but casting a wary eye for trouble (AI 2 May 2002; USDOS 30 Apr 2002; Indonesia specialist 22 Apr 2002; Political scientist 16 May 2002). "They want a safety valve or a Singapore passport to get out of Indonesia if things get bad" (USDOS 30 Apr 2002). Having been targeted during tough economic times, "Now they are savvy enough to look for a way out" (USDOS 30 Apr 2002).

President Megawati generally sympathizes with the plight of the ethnic Chinese because she sees Indonesia as a secular society. Current efforts to devolve power to Indonesia's provincial governments, however, could create security problems for ethnic Chinese if these efforts result in less protection from the central government, military, and police (Indonesia specialist 8 May 2002). Two laws providing for greater political and economic decentralization and for revenue sharing among Indonesia's provinces and districts came into effect in January 2001 (USDOS Mar 2002).

While President Megawati and her predecessor, Abdurrahman Wahid, have lifted many Suharto-era restrictions on ethnic Chinese, some remain. For instance, state universities still have informal quotas that limit the enrollment of ethnic Chinese students (USDOS Mar 2002).

Some reports also suggest that ethnic Chinese face extra paperwork, bureaucratic hassles, and fees when they apply for passports, land titles, bank loans, and university admissions (Go 19 Feb 2002). While authorities no longer have to identify ethnic Chinese by race on Indonesian identification cards, some Sino-Indonesians say this practice still occurs, according to the U.S. State Department (USDOS Mar 2002).

Moreover, human rights groups warn that these problems will be perpetuated if the Indonesian parliament approves a draft citizenship law that, according to human rights groups, retains a clause that in practice requires most ethnic Chinese to get papers proving citizenship in order to obtain official documents (Asmarani 11 Jan 2002).

As it operates in the current law, the clause directs lower courts to issue citizenship papers after hearings in which applicants must prove their citizenship. Many Sino-Indonesians, however, hire middlemen to bribe officials for the documents rather than go through lengthy court procedures. The bribes typically range between 500,000 and one million rupiah ($54 to $108 at an exchange rate of $1 = 9,250.50 rupiah), an onerous amount for poorer ethnic Chinese. The Government of Indonesia plans to submit the draft law to parliament later this year to replace the 1958 Law on Citizenship (Asmarani 11 Jan 2002).

In any case, the political scientist from Ohio State University suspects that many ethnic Chinese would not rush to get new citizenship papers free of racial identification even if these were available. This is because they would be forced to pay the bribes that often are necessary for official transactions (16 May 2002).

Reflecting the more positive trends in Indonesia since Suharto's ouster in 1998, Chinese language publications are no longer banned, with seven locally published Chinese language newspapers now competing for readers. Suharto-era restrictions have also been lifted on Chinese-language private schools (USDOS Mar 2002).

And in a highly symbolic act, former Indonesian president Wahid scrapped a Suharto-era

decree that had prevented Sino-Indonesians from openly practicing Chinese religions, beliefs, or customs. Ethnic Chinese communities throughout the archipelago openly marked the Lunar New Year in 2000 for the first time since 1967 (USDOS Mar 2002). President Megawati has pledged to make the Lunar New Year a national holiday beginning in 2003 (Go 19 Feb 2002).

"Suharto gave the Chinese every economic opportunity but restricted them culturally," the Ohio State University political scientist said, pointing to measures such as the closure of Chinese-language schools. "He tried to turn them into indigenous Indonesians" (16 May 2002).

The political scientist suggested that Megawati's attention to the needs of the ethnic Chinese community might have its limits given the many pressing economic and social problems she must deal with. Megawati "is not going to adopt any policies that discriminate against ethnic Chinese," he said. However, "this is not high on her agenda, either" (16 May 2002).

Indonesia's political and economic uncertainty and turmoil and the legacy of past violence against Chinese Indonesians during tough economic times create uncertainty as to whether or not the days of large-scale violence against ethnic Chinese are over for good. "At the moment there are no serious problems, but they are a vulnerable community," the Amnesty International Indonesia researcher interviewed by the RIC said of the ethnic Chinese. "When tensions rise, they are targeted. They remain vulnerable" (AI 2 May 2002).

The Ohio State University political scientist said he expects some outbreaks of violence against ethnic Chinese if the economy plummets again to the depths reached in 1997 and 1998, although not necessarily on the scale of the past. "Will 1998 happen again?" he asked rhetorically. "It's hard to say. It doesn't take much" (16 May 2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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