

May 5, 2008: Religious strife erodes RI image, say experts - The Jakarta Post

By Tony Hotland

Recent

issues of domestic religious freedom have damaged Indonesia's global reputation as a nation of religious tolerance, experts say.

Noted

Islamic scholar Azyumardi Azra, a professor at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, said Sunday that religious communal conflicts were working against "the government's pretense of trying to be a peacemaker".

"We

rush to get a position at world bodies, to play a role in the resolution of conflicts such as Palestine-Israel or in Iraq, yet we can't even resolve such conflicts at home," he said.

Azyumardi, a

member of the advisory board of the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) in New York, said the world community could not fathom why the government "was bowing down to pressures from vigilante groups globally labeled as hard-liners", adding that "such violent acts were causing setbacks to Indonesian diplomacy".

"If

these minorities were to seek asylum and a country took them on the basis of religious suppression, it would be a slap in our face," he said.

The comments

come in the wake of discussion on the government's role in religious life and violent acts by hard-liners against religious minorities, as seen in the controversy surrounding the Ahmadiyah sect and the forcible closure of minorities' places of worship.

The

Religious Affairs and Home ministries have drafted a joint ministerial decree regarding Ahmadiyah, the details of which are to be announced Monday at the

Home Ministry in Jakarta.

Bantarto

Bandoro, an international relations analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), said "Indonesia was practicing fake diplomacy".

"We say

we are religiously tolerant. But how will the world believe this when they see people getting evicted from their places of worship, or faiths getting banned due to pressure from certain groups?" he said.

The scholars

said it was a matter the government should not play down because human rights-conscious states could put Indonesia in the spotlight.

The UN Human

Rights Council noted last month in its review of Indonesia that religious freedom remained a serious plight.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended last week that Indonesia remain on the U.S. watch list, citing the growing political power and influence of religious extremists "who harass and sometimes instigate violence".

Ahmad

Suaedy, executive director of the Islamic think tank Wahid Institute, said the fact that law enforcement was weak on those hard-line groups made the matter worse.

He said the

President was "handcuffed" by the Islamic parties, which are affiliated with the hard-liners, that politically support his administration.

"I

wonder what our diplomats abroad would answer if their counterparts asked of religious freedom in Indonesia," he said.

