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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today called the verdict in a February mob attack in Indonesia targeting Ahmadiyah Muslims “troubling and disappointing.”

An Indonesian court sentenced the leader of the attack in Banten Province to 5 1/2 months in prison. Eleven others were convicted of lesser charges. Indonesian human rights groups called the sentence far too lenient and a blow to tolerance and religious freedom in Indonesia.

“This is a very troubling and disappointing verdict, and shows that Indonesia continues to struggle with extremism and intolerance in its midst,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. “The fact that extremist groups can use violence and intimidation with only limited consequences has created a culture of insecurity for religious minorities in Indonesia. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is finally saying the right things about societal violence and the need to prosecute those who undertake or incite violence, but as this verdict shows, there remains a distinct gap between rhetoric and practice.”

In its 2011 Annual Report, USCIRF praised the government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for taking positive steps to address terrorism and past sectarian violence, end a civil war in Aceh, and curtail terrorist networks, but noted that religious freedom has come under increasing strain in recent years. Religious minorities have experienced patterns of intimidation, discrimination, and societal violence often perpetuated by groups espousing intolerance and extremism under the banner of Islamic orthodoxy.

Extremist groups also instigated violence against religious minorities and new provincial bans on Ahmadiyah practice have been put in place in East and West Java and South Sumatra. During the past several years, nearly 40 places of worship belonging to religious minorities were

closed, either forcibly by extremist groups or through the denial of building permits by government officials. Despite some strong public statements and arrests, the Indonesian government has been reactive to these developments and has not created an effective deterrent to the violence perpetuated by non-state actors against religious minorities. In addition, Indonesian government officials also continue to employ the “blasphemy law” (Article 156(a)) to harass and detain individuals considered religiously “deviant” and continue to allow the enforcement of local laws restricting the rights of women and some non-Muslims, particularly in Aceh. The activities of extremist groups are sometimes tolerated by segments of the Indonesian government, including the police.

“Indonesia is being held up a model for emerging democracies of the Middle East, but Indonesia’s internal problems of impunity, intolerance, and extremism are threatening Indonesia’s reputation for tolerance and democratic harmony,” said Leo.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

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