

January 31, 2000: Commission Expresses Profound Concern Over Indonesian Strife

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Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today expressed its profound concern over recent religious strife in Indonesia and urged the United States government to use all appropriate means to help end the fighting that has claimed thousands of lives. "The recent rampage of looting, pillage, and murder by Christians against Muslims and Muslims against Christians flies in the face of Indonesia's long history of religious tolerance," said Rabbi David Saperstein, the Commission's chairman. "Thousands more innocent lives could be lost if this cycle of senseless violence continues." Much of the violence is centered in the Maluku islands, once known as the Moluccas or Spice islands. Press reports estimate that up to 2,000 people have died in rioting there since January 1999. While Indonesia as a whole is about 90 percent Muslim, Christians constituted a majority in the Malukus until recently. As the public has grown increasingly frustrated with the government's inability to end the conflict in the Malukus, violence has flared elsewhere, most notably on Lombok Island, a popular tourist destination. Besides the thousands killed, many others have been injured and both Muslim mosques and Christian churches have been reduced to rubble. As Indonesia is the world's fourth-most-populous nation, and the country with the largest Muslim population, the unrest there could have major consequences for regional as well as national stability. The Commission called upon the Clinton administration to urge the Indonesian government, as well as civil and religious leaders, to take all possible steps to restore civil order, foster interreligious dialogue, and help the communities reintegrate and rebuild. "If troops are used to preserve stability, the Indonesian government must see to it that they act in accord with international human rights standards," Chairman Saperstein said, noting the criticism the Indonesian military took for its alleged role in last year's killings in East Timor. The US should also consider offering economic assistance for the people of the Malukus, he added. "Neither Christian nor Muslim can gain from further bloodshed," Saperstein said. "On the contrary: Everybody loses."

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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