Eyewitnesses provide evidence of mass murders
[of Christians by Muslims]

AMBON, INDONESIA. On the morning of Dec. 23, [1999], a group of Muslims murdered scores of Christians, including women and children, at a plywood factory on the Indonesian island of Buru, according to three Christian employees who offer credible evidence of having survived the attack.

Christians and Muslims in Indonesia's Maluku islands have been fighting for more than a year, mainly in clashes that have killed hundreds of militants from both sides.

But reports by Islamic aid groups of recent massacres of Muslims on the northern island of Halmahera and the details now emerging about events on Buru island suggest that violence is increasingly being used against defenseless people.

The level of brutality - in the Malukus and other parts of Indonesia - taxes analysts.

"It is difficult to explain why Indonesians are becoming so easy to run amok," says Azyumardi Azra, rector of an Islamic college in Jakarta, the capital. Amid economic crisis, a transition from dictatorship to democracy, and the threat of regions breaking away, he says, "people have lost belief in government ... in law enforcement - probably they have just lost the belief in their leaders."

Yoke Pauno, a factory worker who has taken refuge in Ambon, the Maluku provincial capital, says she saw armed Muslims ask a woman holding a baby if she was obed or achan, the local slang for Christian and Muslim, respectively. The woman answered "obed," Ms. Pauno says. "Then a man hit her on the right shoulder with a long knife. The baby was also killed."

Although word of the Buru killings has been circulating in Ambon for several weeks, the matter has received scant coverage in the Indonesian media. This article is the first account to appear internationally.

Msgr. Petrus Mandagi, the Roman Catholic bishop in the Malukus, says he believes the killings in Buru constitute the worst single instance of anti-Christian violence in the region so far. But during a visit to Jakarta last week, Monsignor Mandagi says he was unable to persuade the country's media to cover the killings. "They just expose what happened in Halmahera; to me this is disproportional," he says.

Some Indonesian newspapers and television networks have aggressively covered the killings of Muslims, more often portraying Christians as aggressors rather than victims. Independent observers say both sides are responsible for violence and have suffered its consequences.
Military and government officials blame lopsided coverage for inciting further killings, and some militant Muslims have vowed a nationwide campaign of revenge against Christians if the government is unable to stop the violence in the Malukus. Nearly 90 percent of Indonesia's 210 million people call themselves Muslims; Christians make up about 8 percent of the population.

Police say more than 100 people may have been killed at the factory, Waenibe Wood Industry, Inc. Maj. Jekriel Philips, the Maluku police spokesman, says authorities have not visited the site because of a broken bridge and Muslim roadblocks. A "large amount of force" will be needed to enter the factory, he says.

Vulnerable evidence

But accounts from the three Christian employees suggest it is important that authorities act quickly. Pauno and two others say bodies were buried on the factory premises, which are on Buru island's north coast, and that the killers quickly began to remove evidence of the crime.

"Definitely the evidence will disappear," concedes Major Philips, but adds that "the people who did [the killing] will be arrested, since we have good information from eyewitnesses." He says he himself lost a relative in the attack.

Although they could not be independently verified, the accounts of Pauno and two other factory employees - whom the police consider eyewitnesses - appear reliable.

In detailed, independent interviews, Pauno and the two other employees provided internally consistent accounts of the events of Dec. 22 to 24. Their names appear on company employee rolls. Other factory workers interviewed in Ambon, also Christians,
assert that the massacre occurred and that the three hid in a building where the worst of the killing took place.

Several boat owners in Ambon city, a day's sail from Waenibe, would not take reporters to the scene. Attempts to contact factory officials by radio - the only possibility - from the company's office in Ambon were also unsuccessful. Workers there say they are aware of the reports of killings but would not comment further.

An account of the massacre illustrates two themes common to much of the violence that has happened in the Malukus since last January. One is the apparent inability or unwillingness of security forces to intervene in some cases. The other is the sudden and inexplicable nature of the violence, which may be more a result of provocation than long-standing grievances.

The tension began in the late morning of Dec. 22, says Ignatius Balubun, who worked in the logistics section of the factory office. Security officers resolved a fight between a Christian and Muslim, but the Christian returned to his village angry. Police spokesman Philips says Christians then burned at least one Muslim house, which in turn angered local Muslims.

In the early afternoon, Muslims wearing white headbands and wielding swords entered the factory premises to search for Christians, says Agus Lekatompessy, a 13-year veteran of the factory. He left his foreman's post to check on his family and found his anxious wife and three boys on their way to find him.

The following events were related by Mr. Balubun, Mr. Lekatompessy, and Pauno. By midafternoon they and nearly 50 others, almost all Christians, had taken refuge in a managers' dormitory on the advice of factory officials. A handful of police and soldiers gave the two-story facility the appearance of safety.

The factory's security chief, Abduljalal Salampessy, told the refugees they would be taken to safety, but when a red dump truck arrived at 3 a.m. on Dec. 23, the rescue of the Christians was called off. Only a half-dozen foreign workers were taken away, presumably to safety.

Lekatompessy says the atmosphere in the managers' dormitory was "stress, panic, and praying." Muslims outside were throwing rocks at the building.

To evade this hostility, a group of 26 men, women, and children - including Balubun, Lekatompessy, and Pauno - went to a room on the second floor of the dormitory. In a hot, darkened storage room, they waited.

**Under siege**

Sometime after dawn - the accounts of Balubun and Lekatompessy, who say they were wearing watches, differ slightly on the time - six shots were fired. Those on the second
They thought police or military might be taking action against the crowd outside. Instead, the killing began.

They could hear the sound of metal striking the cement floor, children crying, older people asking for mercy - and shouts of Allahu Akbar - God is great. Then there were some sounds of the removal of bodies and urgings to move them quickly. Then silence.

At midmorning, the assailants returned, demanding that the men on the second floor come down. They promised that women and children would be spared. The men began opening the ceiling in the storage room, revealing a hiding space.

Pauno left the room with the women and children. Hanging back, she saw two women and three children being killed at the bottom of the stairs. She turned around and climbed into the ceiling with Balubun, Lekatompessy, and four others.

Peering through a crack in the ceiling, they could see through the window of the storage room. Balubun says he saw Muslims dragging two bodies away. They heard someone refer to "a hole with 38 bodies" and the sound of heavy equipment, which they assumed was digging mass graves.

In the middle of the afternoon on Dec. 23, Lekatompessy and three of the men decided to escape. As they passed through the first floor, he says, he could see blood on the floor and the walls. The furniture was disordered. Lekatompessy and one of the others escaped the factory premises. But he says he saw one of the other three being killed by the Muslims who pursued them.

Balubun and Pauno waited until early morning of Dec. 24 to make their escape. By hiding in log piles, they avoided the Muslims on the property. "Death was right in front of us," Pauno says.

Police spokesman Philips says as many as 50 people may have been killed in the dormitory, as well as a similar number elsewhere on factory premises. Given the approximate 16-hour delay between the herding of the Christians into the dormitory and the killing, he admits that it may have been an intentional, systematic act. But, he notes, the initial burning of the Muslim houses was done by Christians. No one can explain why an act of arson would have precipitated such a terrible vengeance.

The three Christian workers say the factory was not a place of religious animosity. Sure, says Lekatompessy, there were fights over soccer, but in those days Muslims and Christians played on mixed teams.