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Indonesia to Execute 3 for Roles in Riots That Killed Hundreds

By RAYMOND BONNER AUG. 11, 2006

JAKARTA, Indonesia, Aug. 10 — Three men convicted in connection with riots that killed more than 200 people are to be executed Saturday, Indonesian officials said Thursday, in a case that has been marred by questions about their trial and has become embroiled in the country's sectarian politics.

The men are all Christians, which has raised questions about the role their religion may have played in scheduling them for execution, as well as broader questions about the fairness of their trial.

The men, two farmers and a mechanic, were convicted and sentenced to death by firing squad on charges of leading a Christian militia in Poso, in central Sulawesi, that killed more than 200 Muslims in May 2000. From 1998 to 2001, several hundred Christians and Muslims were killed in sectarian violence.

After wending through the Indonesian judicial system for five years, the men have run out of appeals, though some Muslim leaders have called for the government to do a more thorough investigation, which it has not done, and for postponing the executions. Previously, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono denied a request for a pardon.

The case has also become entangled with that of three Muslim men sentenced to

4

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In interviews on Thursday, two government officials said that, for political reasons, it would be very difficult for the government to execute the Bali bombers if it did not first execute the Christians from Poso.

The officials spoke on the condition that they not be identified because they were expressing views contrary to the official government position, which is that the Poso men had been fairly tried and had their appeals denied. Indonesia's population of more than 240 million is overwhelmingly Muslim. Though most are moderate and Indonesia is a secular state, politicians are wary of offending conservative Muslims, whose numbers and influence appear to be growing.

As events unfolded Thursday, it was not at all clear, however, that the government would in any case be able to proceed with the execution of the Bali bombers.

Mahendra Datta, a lawyer for the men, said in an interview that he planned an appeal on their behalf. Under Indonesian law, if he does appeal — he has sent mixed messages in recent weeks — the executions would be automatically stayed.

He also questioned why the government was proceeding so rapidly to execute his clients, who were convicted in 2003, while the Poso defendants were convicted in 2001.

The condemned men from Poso are Fabianus Tibo, 60, Marinus Riwu, 48, and Dominggus da Silva, 42.

In 2001, a three-judge court, after hearing testimony from 28 witnesses, found that Mr. Tibo was the leader of a Christian militia, called the Red Group, that Mr. da Silva was one of his commanders and that Mr. Riwu took part in the killings.

On one day during the May 2000 riots, the Christian gang members, with guns and machetes, killed scores of Muslim men, women and children who had sought protection in a religious school.

The trial was marked by troubling "irregularities," said David McRae, a

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One prosecution witness, for instance, slapped the defendants before taking the stand, Mr. McRae said by telephone from Canberra.

The trial was also affected by the atmosphere at the time, Mr. McRae said. Crowds of angry Muslims gathered outside the courthouse, sometimes throwing rocks. Specific questions have been raised about the role of Mr. Tibo. He has not denied involvement in the riots, but he has vigorously disputed that he was the mastermind.

During his trial, Mr. Tibo gave the court the names of 16 people who he said were the coordinators. Several were senior Christian church leaders.

“There is a very strong sense that whatever Tibo’s role might have been — and it’s fairly unclear — he certainly was not the mastermind,” said Sidney Jones, director of the International Crisis Group office in Jakarta. “So it seems giving the death penalty in this case is just extraordinarily over the top.”

Muktita Suhartono contributed reporting for this article.

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