Tolerance Perishes in Islands’ War

Asie: Religion has torn apart the once unpolarized Molukus. For Indonesia, the implications are serious.

DAVID LASH

February 22, 1978

AMBRON, Indonesia—The war raging in the Molukas is one of ethnic violence, a conflict in which neither side, Christian or Moslem, has political demands; ideology is not an issue. Even the young men who fight are hard pressed to explain how or why it started, much less what they hope to accomplish beyond revenge.

But what they do know is that this island chain long noted for its religious tolerance has changed, perhaps forever. For Indonesia, the implications are serious.

1. Solutions who lived peacefully side by side for years suddenly find emerging from the wreck of their lives and homesteads now weakened by large rubber bands. Church and mosque are in constant strife as the Muslims rally in Jakarta, the nation’s capital, to claim “Bidul,” “Bidul,” a call for holy war.

Laughing Christian teenagers receive a headline Muslim crane through Ambron, a once peacefully uninvolved harbor city of 150,000 people that has been ravaged in the waves of divided Muslins. These days, only a handful of Christians and Muslims cross what locals call the “Gaza Line” that divides the provincial capital of Molukus into religious enclaves.

“I live here in Jakarta,” said Ali Vubloth, an architecture student. “You get in crowded places in Jakarta, like a shopping mall, and you get the feeling someone is always watching you. You never know who might want to kill you. But here you know the conditions. This side is Christian, that side is Muslim. You know where you belong.”

Travellers who ask the Natura Hotel in Ambron, a popular resort town, are met by two armed soldiers, one Christian, one Muslim, to escort them into the city, whose telephone access code is appropriately enough, 991. The city is patrolled by about 8,000 Indonesian soldiers, the waterways by hundreds, the roads by 21 minibuses. Life is still lived on the street, and the fear and fighting have not subsided.

The government places the death toll at a year of violence, sparked originally by the argument between a Christian truck driver and a Muslim passenger, at about 2,000. Human rights groups believe the toll is several times higher. As many as 200,000 people—one in seven of every 10 residents of the Molukus—have fled for the safety of other islands, and a modest tourism industry has evaporated.

“I suppose wounds can heal, but there is so much bitterness, so much division, I’m afraid it will take a long, long time,” said sociologist Iba Makarim, who is helping train counselors from among displaced persons housed in a naval base, hoping that they eventually will return to their villages to work with trauma victims and plant the seeds of reconciliation.

But without reconciliation, Molokans raise questions about the future of the world’s most populous Muslim country, as well as the Indonesian military’s commitment and ability to end religious strife and prevent it from spreading to other islands. How, the people of the Molokans and others ask, could this happen in a nation long known for religious tolerance and moderation, and on islands where coexistence is part of local lore?

“My sister, retired army Gen. Samsudin, a member of the National Commission on Human Rights, said in Ambron recently, “We have been living a myth.”

The facts are: Muslims are building mosques, security forces are preventing Muslims from building mosques, and ethnic soldiers are in a constant struggle to control the situation. Western diplomats say there are indications that regime army officers are linked to violence in Indonesia, from Aceh province in the west to Lambok Island and on to Ambron. The officers’ apparent aim is to discredit President Akbaruddin Wahid, who has the authority to command the army, and to direct attention from investigations into the military’s human rights abuses.

Pew Ambron residents believe that it is the result of official military policy to turn Muslims and Christians against each other—soldiers have confiscated house-to-house matches to move weapons on both sides and in several occasions have prevented attacks. But all too often, security forces have failed to stop violence.

Where then, are the roots of Ambron’s division? Perhaps in history. This remote chain of about 5,000 islands, also called the Molukas, once was the source of almost all the world’s nutmeg and cloves, commodities that centuries ago were worth more than gold. The spices brought Dutch, English and Portuguese explorers, traders, soldiers and missionaries to Asia and led to the birth of Indonesia. Their infirmities turned the Molukas into Indonesia’s only Christian region.

The Dutch, the eventual colonial rulers, favored the Christians, giving them military as well as government jobs. Japanese invaders, who captured Ambron from Australian defenders in 1942, viewed the Christians with suspicion and removed them from the islands. The war ended in 1945, but the Islamic influence and encouraged the Muslims to support the independence of Indonesia, which Japan intended to rule. That dream ended in 1946 when Allied forces landed Ambron.

But the Christians remained so loyal to the Netherlands that, in the late 1940s, they fought alongside Dutch colonists against Indonesian nationalists. On April 28, 1950, the Christians declared the independence of South Molukus. They later set up a government-in-exile in the Netherlands, with which the Dutch maintained contact until 1976.

Under independence, Indonesia settled thousands of non-Molukus migrants—Burmese, Burmese, Makassarese, most of them devout Muslims—on the island chain. Over the years they became the prosperous merchant class, while the Christians, for the most part, were transformed into poor farmers. Villagers Christians were oppressed by Javanese, local police officers with Muslims.

Western diplomats say there are indications that regime army officers are linked to violence in Indonesia, from Aceh province in the west to Lambok Island and on to Ambron. The officers’ apparent aim is to discredit President Akbaruddin Wahid, who has the authority to command the army, and to direct attention from investigations into the military’s human rights abuses.

Few Ambron residents believe that it is the result of official military policy to turn Muslims and Christians against each other—soldiers have confiscated house-to-house matches to move weapons on both sides and in several occasions have prevented attacks. But all too often, security forces have failed to stop violence.

Where then, are the roots of Ambron’s division? Perhaps in history. This remote chain of about 5,000 islands, also called the Molukas, once was the source of almost all the world’s nutmeg and cloves, commodities that centuries ago were worth more than gold. The spices brought Dutch, English and Portuguese explorers, traders, soldiers and missionaries to Asia and led to the birth of Indonesia. Their infirmities turned the Molukas into Indonesia’s only Christian region.

The Dutch, the eventual colonial rulers, favored the Christians, giving them military as well as government jobs. Japanese invaders, who captured Ambron from Australian defenders in 1942, viewed the Christians with suspicion and removed them from the islands. The war ended in 1945, but the Islamic influence and encouraged the Muslims to support the independence of Indonesia, which Japan intended to rule. That dream ended in 1946 when Allied forces landed Ambron.

But the Christians remained so loyal to the Netherlands that, in the late 1940s, they fought alongside Dutch colonists against Indonesian nationalists. On April 28, 1950, the Christians declared the independence of South Molukus. They later set up a government-in-exile in the Netherlands, with which the Dutch maintained contact until 1976.

Under independence, Indonesia settled thousands of non-Molukus migrants—Burmese, Burmese, Makassarese, most of them devout Muslims—on the island chain. Over the years they became the prosperous merchant class, while the Christians, for the most part, were transformed into poor farmers. Villagers Christians were oppressed by Javanese, local police officers with Muslims.

Western diplomats say there are indications that regime army officers are linked to violence in Indonesia, from Aceh province in the west to Lambok Island and on to Ambron. The officers’ apparent aim is to discredit President Akbaruddin Wahid, who has the authority to command the army, and to direct attention from investigations into the military’s human rights abuses.

Few Ambron residents believe that it is the result of official military policy to turn Muslims and Christians against each other—soldiers have confiscated house-to-house matches to move weapons on both sides and in several occasions have prevented attacks. But all too often, security forces have failed to stop violence.

Where then, are the roots of Ambron’s division? Perhaps in history. This remote chain of about 5,000 islands, also called the Molukas, once was the source of almost all the world’s nutmeg and cloves, commodities that centuries ago were worth more than gold. The spices brought Dutch, English and Portuguese explorers, traders, soldiers and missionaries to Asia and led to the birth of Indonesia. Their infirmities turned the Molukas into Indonesia’s only Christian region.