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Emergency declared in Indonesia's Maluku islands after sectarian fighting

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JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) -- Violence gripped Indonesia's Maluku islands Monday, and officials declared a limited state of emergency to halt fighting between Muslims and Christians, the official news agency said.

Church leaders and protesters demanded the United Nations intervene. In the latest clashes in the main city of Ambon, two people were killed and a mosque was burned along with dozens of houses, witnesses said.

"You can hear the fighting raging and see smoke in the distance," said Erik Mohave, a local journalist.

At least 55 people have been killed in the last six days in Ambon, 2,600 kilometers (1,600 miles) northeast of Jakarta. More than 100 died in a Muslim attack on a Christian village in the north of the island group eight days ago.

The official Antara news agency quoted National Police Chief Gen. Rusdihardjo as saying a civil state of emergency had been invoked, giving the military extra powers to impose curfews, set up blockades and detain suspects indefinitely. Local civilian government officials remain responsible for administration of the islands.

The declaration is the first in a three-step alert system that leads to martial law. Analysts, however, said the measure was largely symbolic and more dramatic action was needed.

"We need a special military taskforce to take full control for at least three months," said Salim Said, a military analyst in Jakarta.

Senior police and military officials were not immediately available for comment.

Ambon's Roman Catholic Bishop Joseph Tethool said Indonesia's military has been incapable of enforcing peace. He accused soldiers of incompetence and bias.

Tethool said he had sent a letter to U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan asking the world body to stop the fighting, which has killed more than 3,000 people of both faiths in the past 18 months.

About 50 protesters outside the U.S. Embassy in the national capital, Jakarta, demanded Washington take action. Police squads were on hand but the protest

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remained peaceful.

The protesters climbed the embassy's fence and hung banners that read: "If the United States can save Kosovo, why do you let fighting in Maluku continue?"

Human rights activists in Jakarta also said foreign intervention might be the best way to end the cycle of violence.

"We asked the United Nations to intervene because that is the only way to bring peace to this region," Tethool said in a telephone interview. "The military is no longer capable of stopping the conflict. Many soldiers have taken sides."

Tethool said most Christians have fled the region after Muslims attacked them using high-powered rifles and other weapons.

Indonesian Foreign Affairs spokesman Sulaiman Abdulmanan said Jakarta would not agree to U.N. political or military intervention but would accept humanitarian assistance.

"It's an internal problem. We don't want to see any foreign countries interfering," he said.

Last year, international peacekeepers took control of East Timor after its people voted for independence from Indonesia and triggered a bloody backlash by pro-Jakarta militias.

Almost 3,000 people of both faiths have been killed in the Malukus since the fighting started 18 months ago.

President Abdurrahman Wahid, a Muslim scholar who has long preached religious tolerance, has accused outside provocateurs of whipping up sectarian hatred.

He has banned travel by outsiders to the region following reports that thousands of Islamic vigilantes from elsewhere in Indonesia have taken part in the fighting.

Critics doubt Indonesia's poorly equipped and trained military can enforce the travel ban.

Despite this, the Indonesian navy impounded 10 ships carrying machine guns, knives and poison arrows bound for the strife-torn region in the past few days, The Indonesian Observer newspaper reported Monday.

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