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Security forces have failed to control ethnic conflict

The Indonesian Government is sending military reinforcements to the Moluccan islands following the massacre of at least 50 Christian villagers by Muslim militants.

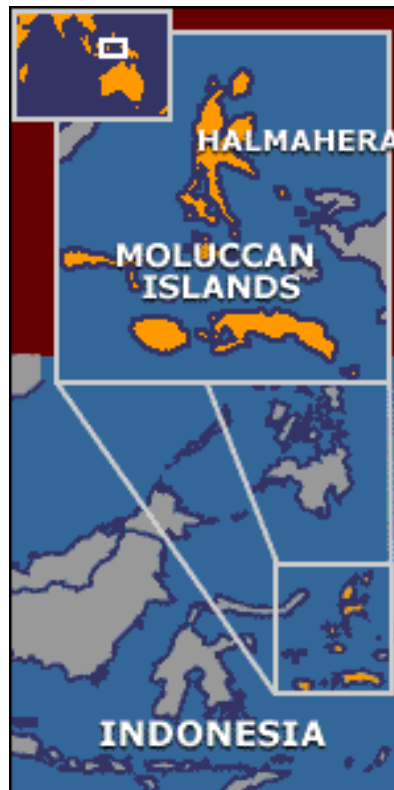
More than 100 others were wounded when about 1,000 attackers armed with guns and knives descended on two villages on Halmahera island.

Several hundred houses and a church were also destroyed after the militants swept in from both land and sea before dawn on Monday.

More than 30 people were killed in a similar raid on another community on Halmahera last week.

The local military commander is posting soldiers and marines to protect the villages.

It is also investigating reports that the extremist group Lashkar Jihad was involved.



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About 2,000 militants are believed to have arrived in the Moluccas in recent weeks, threatening to wage a "holy war".

Reports from the provincial capital of Ambon said another 17 people were killed on Tuesday on Halmahera, but North Moluccas military chief Lieutenant Colonel Sukarwo could not confirm this.



The ethnic violence has stirred deep passions

Pre-dawn raid

The Muslim militants attacked the villages of Makete and Duma on Halmahera before dawn on Monday.

Some swept down from the mountains; others came by boat.

The deputy chief of the Galela-based Synod of Churches, Reverend Biso, said 50 people had been killed and 102 wounded.



Reverend Biso said the militants used the same tactics as in another pre-dawn raid on the island last Thursday, when 35 villagers died after being attacked in their sleep.

"Most of the victims were injured due to bomb shrapnel and gunshot wounds. Houses were also burned and many died in their sleep," Reverend Biso added.

About 2,500 people from both Christian and Muslim communities have been killed in the Moluccas, previously known as the Spice Islands, in a year of religious bloodshed.

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