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Soldiers guard a Christian area in Ambon

Indonesian Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri has begun a new mission to end sectarian violence in the Moluccan Islands, where up to 2,000 people have been killed in the past year.



The visit come hours after reports of a massacre of at least 24 Christian worshippers on the island of Haruku.

Hospital officials are reported to have appealed for immediate medical supplies, saying they could not treat the large numbers of people wounded.

Television footage showed hundreds of houses and churches on fire. Unrest was also reported on Seram and Bacan islands.



Megawati flew to the island of Kai, where she met Muslim and Christian leaders to mediate a ceasefire between mobs of youths from each community.

She arrived in the provincial capital, Ambon, early on

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Jonathan Head reports for BBC News "The government can no longer ignore the violence"

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Monday afternoon and will travel on to a number of other islands before returning to Jakarta on Wednesday.

Her delegation includes the security minister, General Wiranto, as well as six other ministers and police and military officials.

Megawati, who once enjoyed strong support in the Moluccas, was given special responsibility for bringing peace to the region by President Abdurrahman Wahid, but has so far failed to produce any clear strategy.

The BBC Jakarta correspondent says a recent upsurge of violence in the Moluccas, and the angry reaction of Muslims elsewhere in Indonesia, appears to have spurred Megawati into action.

Last week, violence spread to the island of Lombok, where Muslims attacked and destroyed Christian homes and churches.

It was in part a reaction to the slaughter of more than 200 Muslims on Halmahera island, in the northern Moluccas.

Aceh talks hope

The vice-president's visit to the Moluccas comes as President Abdurrahman Wahid prepares to visit another of Indonesia's flashpoints, Aceh, where rebels are fighting for an independent state.

President Wahid has ruled out independence but hopes to talk to rebel and community leaders.

He is due there on Tuesday, after a round of talks with Australia's foreign minister, Alexander Downer, aimed at improving ties between the two countries.

Bilateral relations soured when Australia called for international intervention in East Timor to halt the rising tide of violence that followed the territory's



Megawati has lost support in the Moluccas

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referendum for independence.

"We've been through a difficult period, we want now to look to the future," Mr Downer said after the meeting. "I can only say that I am optimistic about the way the relationship is moving ahead."

Meanwhile in Aceh, there have been reports of clashes between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebels and security forces.

A spokesman for the security services said at least six separatists and one policeman had been killed in two GAM ambushes on police patrols.



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