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Indonesian Muslim students protesting at the violence

By Jakarta correspondent Richard Galpin

Hundreds of members of a radical Islamic group who have threatened to launch a jihad - or holy war - in the Moluccan Islands are arriving in the region.

The authorities are worried their arrival could spark yet another wave of communal violence.

But they say they are powerless to stop them coming.

The Moluccan, or Spice Islands as they were once known, have been wracked by violence between the Christian and Muslim communities since last year.

About 2,500 people have already been killed.

The military commander in the Moluccan Islands, Brigadier-General Max Tamaela, told the BBC that at least 250 members of the militant Islamic group Lashkar Jihad had entered the region.

He said some had just arrived by boat in the provincial capital, Ambon.

Muslim army

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Despite government promises to prevent Lashkar Jihad from travelling from their base hundreds of kilometres away in Java, military chiefs in Ambon say there is nothing they can do to block them.

General Tamaela said the group could not be turned back or arrested as they were not carrying any weapons, although he promised firm action if they were found to be involved in any violence.

But this will be of little comfort to the Christian community, which has been fearing that Lashkar Jihad would succeed in sending its fighters to the region, particularly as they know it will not be difficult for them to get new weapons once they arrive.



The ethnic violence has stirred deep passions

About 3,000 Muslim volunteers received military training at a camp set up by Lashkar Jihad near the capital, Jakarta, last month.

The organisation has threatened to create an army of 10,000 men to fight in the Moluccan Islands if the government does not resolve the conflict there very soon.

After several months of relative calm, a new spate of clashes involving Muslim extremists has erupted.

One Christian activist said some members of the community were preparing for further trouble.

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