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This was the first such rally for several months

Thousands of Muslims have held a rally in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, calling for a jihad, or holy war, in the Moluccan Islands - the scene of prolonged sectarian violence.



Around 5,000 Muslims, some armed with swords and daggers and dressed in white robes, gathered at a sports stadium to mark the Islamic New Year.

Radical leaders told the crowd that 10,000 youths were ready to fight a holy war against Christians in the Moluccas, in the east of the country, and that they hoped to go before the end of April.

President Abdurrahman Wahid has threatened 'stern action' against anyone conducting a jihad, and has ordered a naval blockade to be imposed.

Fiery speeches

Ayip Safruddin, head of the Communication Forum for Muslims, said that if the government stopped his forces from entering the Moluccas, they would wage war on the densely populated island of Java instead.

"It's up to them to choose" he said.

He told the cheering crowd that youth groups were ready to be deployed all over the Moluccas and the surrounding islands.

About 2,000 of the demonstrators later boarded buses and took their protest to the presidential palace, where they were halted by a police blockade.

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▀ The BBC's Richard Galpin reports from Jakarta: "Radical leaders say they'll be sent to the region this month"

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Several of the protesters were given a hearing by President Wahid in his office, but were "angrily rebuffed" a palace spokesman said.

"He threw us out", one of the leaders told journalists after the brief meeting. "The jihad must go ahead," he added.

The president told a delegation on Wednesday that anyone trying to mount a holy war "had better stop it", according the French news agency AFP.



The ethnic violence has stirred deep passions

"If not, we will take stern action against them and the security forces will deal with them" he said.

Thousands killed

Nearly 2,000 people have been killed in fighting between Muslims and Christians in the Moluccan, or Spice Islands, in the past 14 months.

The violence spread rapidly across many different islands from the provincial capital, Ambon, where it appeared to have been sparked by a trivial dispute between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim.

The region has been relatively peaceful in the past two months, although recently up to 20 people were killed in battles around the town of Galela, on the northern island of Halmahera.



President Wahid and Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri visited the province in December to call for peace, and Mr Wahid told both communities to resolve their differences or face intervention.

He has since ordered a naval blockade of the islands to prevent weapons and fighters from entering the area.

The BBC correspondent in Jakarta reports however that Western observers who have been to the islands recently say that some Jihadi groups have managed to reach the northern part of the region.

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