

### Introduction

**D**escribed as a beautiful necklace of pearls set in the ocean, Indonesia is an exotically magnificent nation. Made up of over 18,000 islands, 100 ethnic groups and 300 languages, the country is alive with cultural variety and geographical intricacy. Unfortunately it doesn't always live up to its motto of Unity in Diversity, with thousands having died as a result of independence struggles, communal violence and religious differences.



### History

Between the fifth and 16th centuries several of Indonesia's islands hosted powerful trading kingdoms, which brought first Hinduism, then Buddhism and later Islam. Europeans first came to Indonesia in the early 1500s. The Dutch East India Company took control of the islands in the 17th century in an attempt to secure domination of the spice trade. Later, in 1815, the islands became colonies of the Dutch crown. The Netherlands profited enormously from Indonesia's economy, often at the expense of the local inhabitants.

In the early 20th century, Dutch authority was at its strongest. However, the growth of Indonesian independence led in 1945 to the declaration of independence. This was followed by four years of war until, under international pressure, the Netherlands transferred sovereignty to the local population.

Promising to secure the country after an alleged Communist coup attempt in 1967, army general Suharto became president. In a backlash against supposed Communist supporters, hundreds of thousands of people were killed or imprisoned. During his ensuing decades of power, Suharto enriched himself and his family through widespread corruption.

Indonesia's rich natural resources and manufacturing and services sectors led to great economic growth in the 80s and 90s, creating a rich middle class, but most of the population continued to live in poverty.

In 1997 Indonesia plunged into deep economic crisis, leading to significant changes, especially in government. President Suharto, who had by now been in office for more than 30 years, was forced to resign. Democratic elections were held two years later and a new government elected.

Between 1998 and 2001 Indonesia had three presidents. Three years later, in the largest one-day election in the world, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (known as SBY) was elected president.

### Current challenges

- ▶ Indonesia is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity, due largely to its location near the intersection of shifting tectonic plates. On 26 December 2004 large parts of northern Sumatra, particularly Aceh, were devastated during an undersea earthquake, which created a massive tsunami. Over 170,000 people were killed, around 655,000 people were left homeless, and thousands remain missing.
- ▶ There is growing antagonism towards Christians and other minorities by Islamic extremists. Attempts have been made to limit Christian expansion and reduce Christian influence in the public sector. During 2005 at least 30 churches were closed by Muslim hardliners. Indonesian law states that religious groups must have permission from local communities and the government before building places of worship. In this majority Muslim country, the law is often biased against Christians and other minorities and preferential treatment is given to adherents of Islam.
- ▶ Several provinces are demanding independence from Indonesia, causing unrest and instability. Encouraged by East Timor's success in 1999 the secessionists are seeking to break away from Indonesia after 25 years of occupation.
- ▶ Following the Asian economic crisis in 1997, more than half the population are living below the poverty line.

## BMS involvement in Indonesia

Although there are no long-term workers sent from the UK in Indonesia, BMS World Mission has several supported partner workers who are involved in church planting and evangelism on the islands of Sumatra and Nias. BMS' partner in the country is the Convention of Baptist Churches in Indonesia (KGBI).

### Background information

#### The land

Indonesia is located in Malay Archipelago, the world's largest archipelago, and is made up of over 18,000 islands, 6,000 of which are inhabited. The country covers an area wider than the United States of America. It is situated south and east of mainland Asia and north and west of Australia. There are 33 provinces in Indonesia of which two are special territories (Aceh and Yogyakarta) and one is the capital city territory (Jakarta).

The population can more or less be divided into two groups: the west of the islands is predominantly Asian with mostly Malay people; the east is more Pacific, with the Papuan people in New Guinea. Many Indonesians associate themselves with a specific ethnic group that has its own language and culture. Java, with its population of over 100 million, is the largest populated island in Indonesia.

Lying on both sides of the equator, Indonesia has a tropical, rainy climate and dense rainforest vegetation. Cash crops, mainly coffee, tea, rubber and palm oil, are grown along with subsistence crops, especially rice. There are about 400 volcanoes in Indonesia, around 130 are active and 70 have erupted. The most famous of the eruptions was that of Krakatau in 1883, killing thousands of people on Java and Sumatra.

Indonesia is the tenth largest oil producer and the third largest tin producer in the world. Deforestation is becoming a huge problem due largely to the expansion of paper and lumber-exporting industries.

#### Religion

The standard government ideology of monotheism and communal peace means that all citizens must choose one of five religions: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity (which Indonesia divides into Protestant or Catholic). While government figures estimate the Muslim population to be over 88 per cent, the Christian population to be eight per cent and the Hindu community to be three per cent, it is believed by some that these numbers

are deliberately inflated in favour of Islam. There are great differences in the distribution of these faiths on the different islands. For example, while Bali has less than one per cent Christian, the East Lesser Sunda Island has a Christian population of over 80 per cent.

The Christian community is two-thirds Protestant and one-third Roman Catholic. Most Protestants are of the Dutch or Swiss Reformed tradition and the Dutch legacy is seen in enormous church buildings in places like Jakarta. Lutheran and Pentecostal churches are also present. During the struggle for independence from Dutch rule in the late 40s, many left the Dutch Reformed Church and joined the 'national Church' which subsequently became the Convention of Indonesian Protestant Churches. In 1979 it was renamed the Convention of Indonesian Baptist Churches (KGBI). Though small in number the KGBI have established a number of Bible schools, and train national pastors and evangelists to reach out to every island.

### Prayer points

- ▶ There is widespread tension between Christians and Muslims which has at times escalated into extreme violence. Pray for reconciliation between the two groups and for Christians to show the love of Christ to Muslims in their communities.
- ▶ Pray for Indonesian Christians who are being persecuted, that they will be strengthened in the midst of the pain and suffering.
- ▶ Pray for wisdom and determination for Indonesia's president SBY as he seeks to boost the economy and tackle corruption, regional conflict, terrorism and unemployment.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

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