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It Is Not Chittagong Here – It Is Indonesia

Andre VItchek from Madura Island

Destroyed Shi'a house at Nanggernang hamlet, Karang Gayam village, Omben, Sampang, Madura

Madura Island, poor, uneducated, extremely religious, famous for its brutal buffalo races and clinking bundles of gold on the wrists and necks of local women.

Refugee camp at Sampang

Now for a short time, this island that begins just a mile from the shores of the second largest Indonesian city – Surabaya – made it to the local and international press. Two Shiite men were murdered by a machete-waving crowd of bigots belonging to the Sunni majority. In the single hamlet of Nanggernang (Karang Gayam village), in the center of the island, some 50 houses were destroyed, most of them burned down.

Almost 200 Shi'a people are now living in the indoor tennis stadium turned refugee camp in the nearby city of Sampang.

Some say the dispute began over a young girl, a pupil at a religious boarding school. Two imams – two brothers – one Shia and one Sunni were involved. A Sunni imam fell in love with a girl and his brother prevented him from marrying her.

There are always rumors like that in Indonesia. Bigotry and racism are never blamed on those who commit genocide, murder and discrimination plaguing this archipelago since the US-sponsored coup that put Suharto in power in 1965.

Police car near destroyed village

There are clear signs of 'foreign', namely Saudi influence, but everyone is afraid to speak about the issue.

"Not all Saudi alumna in Indonesia are anti Shi'a", explains Azyumardi Azra, Director of the Graduate School of State

Islamic University in Jakarta. "Look at the former Minister of Religious Affairs, Said Aqil Husein Munawar."

But one could say, look at the present one – Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali and what comes from his mouth: "Converting Shiite Muslims to the Sunni Islam followed by most Indonesians would be the best way to prevent violent outbreaks…"

The government of Indonesia is once again failing to stop the violence against minorities. The outbreak of fierce discrimination did not begin with some love story, but with the religious fatwa passed by the MUI [Indonesian Ulema Council] of Sampang deeming Shia as heretical.

And by the militant pamphlets that are being distributed by *mussalas* in Sampang and elsewhere in Madura, as well as East Java, proclaiming that the Shia community is following misguided teachings of Islam, with the conclusions that "The Muslims have to be alert of Shia."

"Before Ramadan this year, *Al Anwar mussala* from across the street had been broadcasting sermons twice a week. They had their loudspeakers directed towards our school. They were broadcasting that our blood is halal", explains Naila Zakiyah, a Shi'a teacher at Al Mahadul Islami Yapi boarding school in the city of Bangil, East Java, which includes a sizeable Madurese population.

Investigating this latest case of religious intolerance, on a recent journey to Madura, right after the ferry crossing I came across the most polluted beach I

They lost their son in anti-Shi'a pogrom

have seen anywhere in the world. No sand was visible; the entire shore was covered by garbage.

And on the horizon, like some terrible ghosts, stood enormous decomposing cargo ships.

I drove closer, soon realizing that what I was witnessing was an Indonesian version of the infamous Bangladeshi breaking yards found in Chittagong.

Hundreds of coolies were taking apart, with their bare hands, enormous sea vessels. The sparks were flying, terrible fumes covering the area, and the water all around was turning black.

I was told that people die here, or get injured. It was explained that periodically there are terrible explosions.

The images were so powerful that I immediately went to work, using my entire still and filming equipment.

For some reason I felt that what I was witnessing in the interior of the island of Madura was connected to those violent images from the coast.

It was what the mainstream Indonesian and Western press mostly omit that made the stories of Madura and so many places all over the archipelago so powerful and often so appalling: the intolerance, even feudalism, in which the country with its chronically low level of education and disgraceful poverty was still living.

The hellish images of the breaking yard were somehow synonymous to the mental state of those who kill, destroy and insult because of ethnicity or belief.

Text and photos by Andre Vltchek.

Andre Vltchek is a novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His book on Western imperialism in South Pacific is *Oceania* and is available here. His provocative book about post-Suharto Indonesia and its market-fundamentalist model, is "Indonesia – The Archipelago of Fear".

He recently produced and directed the 160 minutes documentary film "Rwandan Gambit" about the pro-Western regime of Paul Kagame and its plunder of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and "One Flew Over Dadaab" about the world's biggest refugee camp. After living for many years in Latin America and Oceania, Vltchek presently lives and works in East Asia and Africa.

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