**Indonesian Christians Flogged in Rare Shariah Punishment for Non-Muslims**

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Two Indonesian Christians were publicly whipped for gambling, a rare case of non-Muslims being punished in a province that’s imposed strict Islamic law in the world’s most-populous Muslim-majority country.

The man and woman, residents of Aceh province on the northern tip of Sumatra island, were whipped at least six times each Tuesday by a robed man wearing a mask and wielding a rattan cane. Hundreds of onlookers jeered them as the punishment was carried out on a stage next to a mosque in the provincial capital, Banda Aceh.

The pair were punished for playing a game at a children’s entertainment complex in a way authorities say amounted to gambling, said Yusnardi, head of Banda Aceh’s Shariah police force, which enforces laws rooted in Islamic faith. Gambling is illegal across this country of 250 million people. A Muslim man involved in the case received at least 19 strokes.

Details on what the game entailed weren’t immediately clear.

Separately, an unmarried Muslim man and woman received more than 20 lashes each for the offense of being intimate together.

The sentences brought swift condemnation from human-rights groups. “Corporal punishment is torture under the United Nations Convention against Torture, which Indonesia has ratified,” said Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch.

Aceh is the only province in Indonesia governed by Shariah law, under a measure of autonomy allowed to settle a separatist conflict. But the country as a whole faces increasing challenges from conservatives pushing an Islamic agenda.

Last year, hardliners succeeded in a campaign to imprison the Christian governor of Jakarta for blasphemy. A revision of the criminal code is currently under negotiation, including provisions pushed by Islamic parties that would imprison homosexuals or unmarried cohabiting heterosexuals.

Some 98 percent of Aceh’s five million people are Muslims and are subject to Shariah. They can face flogging for offenses including drinking alcohol, adultery, gay sex, gambling or having romantic relationships before marriage. The province’s Shariah courts are imposing hundreds of whippings a year.

The minority who aren’t Muslims have a choice of being punished under either the civil code or Shariah. Some choose flogging to avoid lengthy prison terms. Last month, a Christian was sentenced to 36 lashes for selling alcohol.

Indonesia has long struggled with a minority of extremists. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda killed hundreds of people in bombings—and the country has been on the lookout for possible returnees among the Indonesians who joined Islamic State in the Middle East.

Prominent groups of the country’s bombing survivors declined this week to participate in meetings orchestrated by officials to allow reformed terrorist convicts to make formal, face-to-face apologies to victims.