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Thousands have fled the unrest

The Indonesian authorities say more than 100 people have been killed in the latest outbreak of religious violence in the eastern Moluccan islands.

A military spokesman in the provincial capital, Ambon, said 114 people were killed in the fighting on Monday on the island of Halmahera, scene of some of the bloodiest clashes between Muslims and Christians in recent months.

The spokesman said he expected the death toll to rise. He added that 70 people had also been seriously injured, and nearly 300 houses burned down.

The violence - some of the worst yet seen on the islands - took place in the Christian village of Duma. Reports say the victims were killed by home-made bombs, guns and other weapons.

Military officials said an unknown number of women and children had been kidnapped.

More than 50 people were killed in the same village last month.

Church razed

The authorities have so far declined to say who the warring parties were, but local sources say gangs of Muslim militants attacked the Christian inhabitants of Duma.

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▶ The BBC's Jonathan Head "We are pretty certain that this is another clash between Christians and Muslims"

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One woman from a Christian crisis centre in a neighbouring district said Muslims armed with machetes had attacked some 200 Christians taking refuge in a church in the village.

"They bombed the church and burned it down," she told Reuters, quoting witnesses who had managed to escape.

The authorities say the fighting subsided only after Indonesian soldiers intervened and evacuated survivors. The situation remains tense.

Holy war

Indonesia is predominantly Muslim, but the Moluccas, or Spice Islands, have a majority Christian population.

Thousands have been killed in the region since January 1999, when sectarian fighting broke out between the two communities amid a breakdown of law and order following the downfall of former President Suharto.

Hundreds of thousands of people have fled to other islands and provinces in fear of their lives.

At first, local Christians tried to drive out Muslim immigrants.

But the recent upsurge in violence has been blamed on the extremist Lashkar Jihad Muslim militant group.

About 2,000 of its members, some armed with automatic weapons, are believed to have arrived in the Moluccas in May to wage a "jihad" or holy war against the Christian community.

Military

A BBC correspondent in the region says that what makes the violence so alarming for the Indonesian Government is the persistent failure of the security forces to do anything to stop it.

He says many Indonesians believe the military is not only turning a blind eye to the activities of the Muslim militants, but may be arming them as well.

Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, a respected Muslim cleric who espouses religious tolerance, visited the Moluccas at the end of last year.

He told the islanders to resolve their differences or face intervention from the government, which is battling to contain separatist and religious unrest across the vast Indonesian archipelago.

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