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Sunday, 5 December, 1999, 12:35 GMT

[World](#)**Sectarian clashes erupt in Indonesia**[Africa](#)[Americas](#)[Asia-Pacific](#)[Europe](#)[Middle East](#)[South Asia](#)[From Our Own Correspondent](#)

Forty people died in riots last month

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At least 31 people are reported to have been killed in an upsurge of fighting between Muslims and Christians in the eastern Moluccan islands of Indonesia.

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Provincial police spokesman Major Philip Jekriel said the violence broke out on Seram island early on Friday when Muslims from the village of Buano Utara attacked the predominantly-Christian village of

Alang Asaudi.

Major Jekriel told the AFP news agency that security forces had moved to contain the violence, but gave no further details.

The Media Indonesia daily said security personnel had been too slow in dealing with the violence, resulting in the high number of casualties.



The reported death toll makes this one of the worst single clashes of the year-long conflict, which has claimed the lives of more than 550 people.

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▶ The BBC's Jonathan Head "One small spark has set off a fight in which one community's attacked the village of another"  real [28k](#)

At least 40 people were killed in fighting between the two religious communities in the provincial capital, Ambon, last month.

The BBC's Jakarta correspondent, Jonathan Head, says the authorities appear unable to stop the violence despite bringing large numbers of fresh troops to the region.



The security forces have struggled to contain the violence

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In November the military replaced more than 1,000 troops and police after admitting they had been taking sides in the conflict.

Call for peace

On Thursday Indonesian Muslim leaders called for a halt to the sectarian clashes to mark the religious festivals of Ramadan and Christmas.

"As religious followers, we are prohibited to spoil and pollute the sacred days we believe in," said Kafrawi Ridwan, the chairman of the Indonesian Mosques Council.

The Muslim holy month of fasting begins in Indonesia on 9 December and overlaps with Christmas.

"Let's again create peace and uphold unity by intensifying dialogue and cooperation for the sake of common prosperity," he said.

Fight for survival

Unlike the rest of Indonesia, which is predominantly Muslim, the Moluccas have for centuries had a population evenly mixed between the two faiths.

Community leaders were able to peacefully manage

disputes between Muslims and Christians until the fall of the Suharto regime last year when people started to take the law into their own hands.

Our correspondent says both sides in the Moluccas now appear to view it as a struggle for survival in which they must either fight or lose their identity.



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