

## Christian Churches support Malaysian Catholics under attack over Allah's name



*Ecumenical solidarity towards the Church of Malaysia is growing. Shocked and dismayed, the World Methodist Council hopes to see the "rather troubling" court ruling overturned. The latter would allow only one religion to take ownership over a universal term. The United Nations also weighs into the issue, calling it a violation of religious freedom.*

Kuala Lumpur (AsiaNews, <http://www.asianews.it/>, 12 February 2014) - Catholic and Protestant Churches around the world have expressed their support for Christian leaders in Malaysia, who have come under attack and increasing pressure as a trial approaches against non-Muslim Malaysians using the word Allah.

The World Methodist Council (WMC) is the latest body to express its solidarity, shocked and dismayed by the Court of Appeal's ruling in October to bar the Catholic weekly, *Herald*, from using the word.

In a letter addressed to the Christian Federation of Malaysia, WMC general secretary Bishop Ivan Abrahams wrote that the decision was a "rather troubling" attempt by the courts in Malaysia to allow one religion to take ownership over a universal term.

The World Methodist Council represents over 80 million people, spread over 130 countries around the world.

"The verdict has the possibility to create unnecessary division between Christians and Muslims in Malaysia," Bishop Abrahams said.

The prelate further noted that the use of the word God in a believer's mother tongue was "not something that authorities should be seen as politicising".

The children of Abraham share the same God, and a claim to exclusive ownership over the name would constitute a divisive action.

The prayers of millions of WMC members follow the solidarity expressed last week by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which stated in a letter, "This is not just a matter of faith, but also a reality of history and language."

ELCA leaders slammed Malaysian authorities for last month's raid when they seized 300 copies of the Bible.

Even the United Nations weighed in on the Allah issue in Malaysia, when its Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, called on the Malaysian government to reverse the court's decision to ban the Catholic weekly from using the word.

The problem is not only terminological. Recently, Malaysia's Catholic community has come in for direct attacks, with gravestones and tombs desecrated in a cemetery and Molotov cocktails thrown at a church.

The dispute over the use of Allah's name by non-Muslims broke out when the government took to court the *Herald*, a Catholic weekly, and its editor, Fr Andrew Lawrence.

In October last year, a Court of Appeal ruled against the Catholic paper using Allah's name.

An appeal was filed against the decision and the case is scheduled to be heard on 5 March.

The appeal is not only designed to uphold minority rights, but also restore harmony and promote peaceful coexistence among the nation's ethnic groups.

In Malaysia, a nation of more than 28 million people, mostly Muslims (60 per cent), Christians are the third largest religious group (after Buddhists) with more than 2.6 million members.

A Latin-Malay dictionary published 400 years ago shows that the word 'Allah' was already in use to describe the Biblical God in the local language.