**Indonesian Christian publicly whipped for selling sharia-banned booze**

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An Indonesian Christian was publicly flogged on Friday for selling alcohol in conservative Aceh province, a violation of Islamic law, as a crowd of onlookers including children jeered.

Jono Simbolon grimaced in pain when a masked religious officer lashed his back with a rattan stick on a makeshift stage outside a mosque in the provincial capital Banda Aceh.

He is only the third non-Muslim to suffer a public whipping since Aceh, on Sumatra island, began implementing Islamic law after it was granted special autonomy in 2001 — an attempt by the central government to quell a long-running separatist insurgency.

“This is our government’s commitment to enforcing Islamic law,” said Banda Aceh mayor Aminullah Usman.

“If there is a violation (of the law) immediately report it to the sharia police and we will carry out a punishment like today’s caning,” he said, referring to religious authorities.

A doctor checked on Simbolon’s condition after 10 strokes before the flogging continued.

He was one of 10 people –- eight men and two women –- caned after Friday prayers for offences including pimping, prostitution, and gambling.

One unmarried couple received 20 strokes each for being too physically close to each other — seen as a prelude to banned pre-marital sex.

Simbolon was arrested in October and sentenced to 36 lashes for selling illegal alcohol.

About 98 percent of Aceh’s five million residents are Muslims subject to religious law, known locally as Qanun.

Non-Muslims who have committed an offense that violates both national and religious laws — such as selling bootleg liquor — can choose to be prosecuted under either system.

“[Simbolon] is a Christian but he decided to bow to Qanun,” chief prosecutor Erwin Desman said, adding that the man may have chosen a flogging to avoid a lengthy criminal prosecution.

Aceh is the only province in Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country, which implements Islamic law, or Sharia.

Last year, two gay men who admitted having sex were flogged in Aceh, with each receiving 100 strokes of the cane, drawing heavy criticism from rights groups.

Gay sex is not illegal in the rest of Indonesia, which mainly follows a criminal code inherited from former colonial ruler the Netherlands.