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Thousands gather at "Ground Zero" for rare purification ceremony after terrorist attack

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Just a little over a month after the bombing of a Bali nightclub which left 190 from fourteen nations dead, "Ground Zero" at Kuta beach is crowded elbow to elbow with thousands of mourners, here to witness and participate in a unique Hindu purification ceremony.

The throngs of visitors both native Balinese and foreign guests have come to witness a ritual that has not been performed in Bali in living memory. The ritual is called the Pamarisudha Karipubhaya. Its purpose is to cleanse and purify the area of malevolent spirits and toxic energies and release the survivors from any remaining psychological trauma.

The Pamarisudha Karipubhaya is held when an area suffers a large number of violent deaths, usually from enemy attack an event absent in the recent history of this vacation paradise. The car bomb detonated on

October 12 by a Muslim extremist, who may have links to Al-Qaeda, fits that description.

The November 15, full-moon ritual sponsored by the Bali Provincial Government involved the orchestration of thousands of local Balinese from a dozen villages in and around Kuta beach. A number of high staging platforms were erected to support the weight of offerings brought by pilgrims. One ornate 12-foot-high platform was for the Gods to take their seats as they attend the ceremony. Balinese gamelan music rang in the air, and a dozen dance groups performed. Ten high priests were called upon to recite the proper mantras and preside over the ceremonies. Thousands of temples across the island performed smaller cleansing rituals simultaneously. The ancient blessings were relayed across the globe by scores of international and national television crews.

Witnessing the event were over fifty Australians who lost family members in the blast, their airfare and lodgings paid for by the Indonesian government. There were also a number of Indonesian Muslim victims with their families. At least 1,000 police officers were on hand to guard the area, with another 2,800 nearby.

Nengah Cipta, the secretary general of the organizing

committee, told AFP wire service the ceremony sought the Gods' blessing so that life in Bali can return to normal. He said the ceremony would also involve the symbolic collection of dirt from the scene of the blast which would be thrown in the sea. "Factually, we will throw the dirt into the sea. Philosophically, we will throw away feelings of fear, anxiety, etc. The ocean is believed to be a neutralizer," Cipta said before the observations began. The purification blessed the souls of the victims of the blasts, "so that they can continue their journey to another life," he said.

Balinese hope that, along with cleansing Ground Zero, a harmonious balance between sekala (the physical realm) and niskala (the spiritual realm) will be re-established. While the purpose of this ceremony is clearly religious in nature, Balinese are hoping that it will help jump-start the devastated tourist industry. An event of this size, costing over ^{us}\$70,000 and attended by thousands of foreign guests, may indeed help to restore some faith in Indonesia's internal security. It represents a spiritual show of force for Bali's three million Hindus a small percentage of Indonesia's population of 230 million citizens, 88 percent of whom are Muslim.