

Authorities in Vietnam Raid, Threaten House Churches

✖ Local authorities in Vietnam have balked at registering house churches, contributing to a recent uptick in sometimes violent harassment of congregations.

Four police officers and two government officials broke up the Sunday morning worship service of a house church in Tran Phu Commune in Hanoi on July 26, announcing that it was illegal to worship and teach religion. The police chief of Tran Phu Commune in greater Hanoi, Dang Dinh Toi, had ordered the raid.

When Christians under the leadership of Pastor Dang Thi Dinh refused to sign a document admitting they were meeting illegally, an angry police officer shouted, “If I find you meeting here next Sunday, I will kill you all like I’d kill a dog!”

Officials had previously refused to grant the church’s application for registration. Pastor Dinh and the national leader of the Ecclesia Revival denomination, Pastor Vo Xuan Loan, appealed to commune authorities the following day—again trying to register the church according to the Prime Minister’s 2005 Special Directive Concerning Protestants.

The commune head angrily proclaimed, “There are absolutely no Christians in this commune!” and then shooed them away, church leaders reported.

In nearby Hung Yen province, an Agape Baptist house church led by Pastor Duong Van Tuan was raided several times in June. Since then Compass learned from Pastor Tuan that his wife Nguyen Thi Vuong was badly abused on June 21. A group of policemen roughed her up, and then two of them seized her by her arms and repeatedly banged her head into a wall, he said.

When she fainted, Pastor Tuan said, they dragged her out and dumped her in a nearby field. Fellow Christians took her to medical care. The church situation remains unresolved.

Also in the north, in Viet Thuan Commune of Thai Binh Province, commune police broke up a house church meeting of the Vietnam Good News Mission Church on July 25, seizing seven hymnals and summoning Pastor Bui Xuan Tuyen to the police station for interrogation. In a letter to his superiors, Pastor Tuyen complained of police cursing and scolding him.

They confiscated his motorbike and sent it to a distant district office. In spite of such pressure, he refused to write a confession for what they termed his “crimes.” He was held until 10 p.m. before being released to collect his motorbike.

Southern Troubles

The situation is not better in the south. On July 31 Vietnam Good News Mission Church Pastor Mai Hong Sanh was subjected to a public denunciation and trial reminiscent of 1950s-style communism in the town of Ea Hleo, in Dak Lak Province.

He was sentenced to three months of “local re-education” for expanding his house without permission and giving religious training without permission – both practically impossible for Christians to obtain – and “causing social division.” This was the government’s answer to his church’s aspirations and attempts to provide training for ethnic minority church workers at Pastor Sanh’s home.

As a result, he can go nowhere without prior permission and must submit to political indoctrination courses at the whim of local officials. About 120 people, mostly town officials and police, attended his “trial” – Pastor Sanh was not allowed to defend himself, and authorities marshaled people they said were members of another church to accuse him, Christian sources said.

On Sunday, some 15 policemen barged into a house church worship service in Xuan Thoi Thuong Commune, Hoc Mon district, Ho Chi Minh City. Brandishing batons and electric prods, police demanded that people leave immediately, according to local sources. Two new believers fled, they said, but most of the small congregation remained.

In a show of force, police officers also lined up outside the house and announced to curious neighbors who had gathered, "If anyone of you come to Chinh's house and believe in his God, you will be in deep trouble," according to the sources. Nguyen Van Chinh, leader of this independent house church, had been receiving such visits and threats by security forces since January.

Following the advice of local authorities, he had tried to register his house church as provided by Vietnamese law, but to no avail. At midnight on July 24, five police officers beat on his door demanding to be let in "to check IDs."

Though he had submitted a registration application months before, they told him that "future zoning would not allow religious activities" and that he must permanently cease church meetings, sources said. When his congregation continued meeting, he was issued an "administrative fine," which he appealed. His house church continued worshiping, leading to Sunday's raid.

Church leaders said such incidents are representative of many others not reported for security reasons. Asked about the reasons for this uptick in harassment, church leaders strongly agreed that it is a firm though unwritten government policy to try to stop any expansion of Christianity. They said the harassment was so widespread that it must have approval from the top level of the central government.

All of the churches in this report tried to register according to supposedly clear government guidelines but have been denied

without a legitimate reason.

Christian leaders also observed that Vietnam, having achieved its goal of getting off the U.S. religious liberty black list and won accession to the World Trade Organization, no longer worries much about international opinion. Others added that authorities, who retain a special suspicion of Christianity, are trying to suppress any expressions of the widely growing discontent with Vietnam's government and the Communist Party.

At the same time, Catholics have been involved in larger clashes with authorities and with gangs of thugs widely believed to be hired and stirred up by the government. The government-backed gangs have beaten Catholic families. A fierce clash between Catholics and the government flared up in Dong Hoi City, in central Quang Binh province, on July 22. Police and hoodlums interfered with some 200 faithful trying to rebuild part of the bombed out Tam Toa Cathedral.

Reminding Catholics of the heavy-handed ending to church property claims in Hanoi last year, this incident quickly got the support of Catholics around the country. Some estimated that up to 500,000 Catholics nationwide participated in prayer vigils the following Sunday.

According to a long-time Compass source on Vietnam, the legally registered Protestant bodies are no more optimistic than their Catholic counterparts. Their leaders complain of unending bureaucratic blockages, harassment and interference.

"Overall, there is more pessimism today than four or five years ago, when people had hopes that new religion regulations might lead to steady improvement," the source said.

"But it was not to be. Hence trust in government promises to improve religious liberty is at a very low ebb."