

Lao Officials Arrest 11 Christians at Gunpoint

Following the arrest of 11 Christians at gunpoint on Tuesday (Jan. 4), three house church leaders remain behind bars for “holding a secret meeting,” according to advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

Lao authorities today released six of the house church Christians, including two children ages 4 and 8, from Khammouan Provincial Prison, central Laos. Two other men were released yesterday (Jan. 5).

The charge against the three church leaders is a political offense punishable by law, HRWLRF said. It identified the three men only by their given names as Pastor Wanna from Nakoon village church, Chanlai from Tonglar village church and Kan from nearby Nahin village church, all in Hinboun district, Khammouan Province.

The other eight Christians initially arrested were identified as Sompon, his wife and two children, along with a man identified only as Wantorn, all from the capital, Vientiane; Bounma and Kay from Nakoon village church, and Pastor Sipan from Dongthai church in Takkek district, Khammouan Province.

Authorities first detained the 11 Christians at gunpoint on Tuesday (Jan. 4) after they gathered at Wanna’s home for delayed Christmas celebrations, according to HRWLRF.

In December, Wanna informed authorities that church members would gather at his home on Wednesday (Jan. 5) to celebrate Christmas, in line with official celebrations by the government-approved Lao Evangelical Church scheduled between Dec. 5 and Jan. 15.

A truckload of district police officers with guns cocked and

ready to shoot burst into Wanna's house after dark on Tuesday (Jan. 4) shouting, "Stop! Nobody move!" They then forcibly detained the 11 who were quietly sharing an evening meal and charged them with conducting a "secret meeting" without approval.

Police officers released two of the Christians yesterday (Jan. 5) and moved the remaining nine to Khammouan Provincial Prison. A further six, including Sompon's wife and children, were released today, leaving only three key leaders from Khammouan house churches behind bars.

HRWLRF has called for urgent advocacy for the three, on the grounds that officials have charged them with a political offense that may lead to harsh prison terms.

Oppression, Re-Education, Imprisonment

Oppression in Hinboun district, Khammouan Province began in earnest after residents of three villages professed faith in Christ, according to HRWLRF.

In 2008 a handful of Christians began meeting at Wanna's house in Nakoon village. By 2009 the number had grown to 105 people, or 25 families. During that time, local officials repeatedly interrogated Wanna, threatening him with arrest and imprisonment if he did not renounce his faith and cease encouraging others to believe in God.

Wanna, however, continued to hold meetings at his home until officials arrested and imprisoned him last May. Authorities then rounded up the church members and subjected them to several days of re-education, informing them that, "We have fought the Americans for many years, and now you are being deceived and caught by their traps."

The Christians were then forced to sign documents renouncing their faith.

After releasing Wanna in October, officials warned him to

practice his faith in private and hold no further meetings at his home. Wanna ignored these warnings, and several families joined him for Sunday worship services.

In December, Wanna informed village authorities that the church would hold Christmas celebrations at his home on Jan. 5, in line with plans by the official Evangelical Church of Laos to hold Christmas celebrations between Dec. 5 and Jan. 15.

Another Christian, Chanlai (also known as Yohan), began sharing his faith in 2008 with the residents of Tonglar village, some five kilometers (nearly three miles) away from Nakoon. By 2009, a total of 15 families had professed faith and began worshiping in Chanlai's home. Authorities arrested Chanlai along with Wanna last May, charging Chanlai with influencing residents to believe in God and holding worship meetings in his home.

Following Chanlai's arrest, officials detained the other 14 families for a day of re-education and forced them to sign documents renouncing their faith.

In October, when Chanlai and Wanna were released, authorities warned Chanlai that he should desist from holding worship meetings or "be killed."

Another house church was established in 2008 in nearby Nahin village, around five kilometers (nearly three miles) from Nakoon village, with 10 families or 58 Christians meeting at the home of church leader Kan.

Nahin village authorities early last year subjected the Christians to five days of re-education, announcing that, "Whoever believes in the Christian faith is caught in the trap of the enemy!" They also declared that worship meetings were considered to be "secret meetings," a term with political connotations punishable by law.

Under great duress, five families or a total of 27 Christians in Nahin then signed documents renouncing their faith; the others refused, but they refrained from meeting together for fear of further punishment until Wanna was released last October.