

Lao Officials to Expel More Christian Families

Officials in Katin village, southern Laos have ordered six more Christian families to renounce their faith or face expulsion in early January, advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported.

The Katin chief and the village religious affairs officer, along with local security forces, recently approached the six families with the threat after having expelled 11 Christian families, totaling 48 people, at gunpoint last January. The six families now under threat had become Christians since the January expulsion.

The eviction last January followed months of threats and harassment, including the confiscation of livestock and other property, the detention of 80 men, women and children in a school compound and the death by asphyxiation of a Christian villager. (See , "Lao officials Force Christians from Worship at Gunpoint," Feb. 8.)

Immediately after the expulsion, two more families in Katin village became Christians despite the obvious risk to their personal safety, according to HRWLRF. The village chief allowed them to remain in Katin but warned all villagers that their own homes would be "torn down" if they made contact with the expelled Christians.

In the following months, the expelled villagers suffered from a lack of adequate shelter, food and water, leading to eye and skin infections, diarrhea, dehydration and even the death of one villager. Katin authorities also denied Christian children access to the village school. (See , "Christians Expelled from Village Suffer Critical Illnesses," May 14.)

District officials in early May gave the Christians permission to return to Katin and take rice from their family barns to prevent starvation, said another source on condition of

anonymity. Some families then tried to cultivate their rice fields to avoid losing them completely, but the work was extremely difficult as authorities had confiscated their buffaloes, essential to agriculture in Laos.

Threat to Shoot

In July, officials from the Saravan provincial headquarters and the Ta-o-yl district religious affairs office met with the evicted families in their shelters at the edge of the jungle and encouraged them to return to Katin, HRWLRF said.

The Christians agreed to return under five conditions: that authorities designate a Christian "zone" within Katin to avoid conflict with non-believers; that all forms of persecution end; that their children return to school; that Christians must be granted the right of burial in the village cemetery; and that the village award compensation for six homes destroyed in the January eviction.

When higher-level officials approached Katin leaders with these terms, village officials and local residents rejected them, insisting that they would only allow the Christians to return if they gave up their faith. The higher officials invoked Decree 92, a law guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities, but village heads said they would shoot every Christian who returned to Katin.

Shortly after this discussion took place, a further four families in Katin became Christians, according to HRWLRF.

A communist country, Laos is 1.5 percent Christian and 67 percent Buddhist, with the remainder unspecified. Article 6 and Article 30 of the Lao Constitution guarantee the right of Christians and other religious minorities to practice the religion of their choice without discrimination or penalty.