

Two Evangelists in Vietnam Sentenced to Prison

Christians

receive six and four years respectively for 'undermining national unity.'

Two Christian evangelists, Ksor Y Du, 47, and Kpa Y Co, 30, were

sentenced this month to six and four years in prison respectively for

"undermining national unity."

Ksor and Kpa, of

the Vietnam Good News Mission (VGNM) church, received the harsh sentences on

Nov. 15. House arrest of four and two years respectively also was added to the

sentences, according to church sources and Vietnam's *Phap Luat* (Law)

newspaper. Both evangelists, who are of the Ede minority, live in Song Dinh

district of Phu Yen Province, where there are some 20 VGNM congregations.

Ksor was one of

many thousands of ethnic minority people in Vietnam's Central Highland that

participated in demonstrations in 2004 against religious oppression and illegal

confiscation of their traditional lands. Many of the demonstrators were

Christians. Along with hundreds of others, he was caught trying to flee to

Cambodia following the harsh military crackdown after the

demonstrations. He spent four years in prison and another year under house arrest.

In May of 2009, Ksor joined the VGNM, a house church network that has grown from 14 congregations meeting in homes in 2007 to 360 today. In spite of many attempts to register house churches, as provided by Vietnam's religion regulations, only three congregations have been given local permission to carry on religious activities.

In September 2009, Ksor underwent three weeks of interrogation, and authorities pressured him to refrain from making international phone calls. His imprisonment had left him destitute and in poor health, and he has said he told authorities that he only called a relative in the United States three times to ask for funds for medicine and to repair his dilapidated house.

Phap

Luat reported that he made 58 international phone calls, a gross exaggeration according to Ksor's family. The newspaper reported that Ksor made the calls to take orders from abroad to incite people to join the illegal "Dega" church, which allegedly aimed to cause political unrest and demand independence for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Vietnamese

authorities remain extremely suspicious of anyone who has dared to participate in demonstrations, especially if they become church leaders.

The two

evangelists were arrested on Jan. 27. Ksor was on his way to the police station to answer yet another summons when he was intercepted by police, who tied his hands and dragged him behind a motorcycle to the station, according to village sources. He fell many times and arrived bloodied and bruised.

Both men were

held 10 months without charges until their Nov. 15 trial, the area sources said.

Authorities brought Ksor's teenage daughter to prison and told her to testify

that her father had made many overseas phone calls, according to VGNM leaders.

When she refused, a female officer twice slapped her hard across the face before sending her away, the church leaders said.

During

interrogation, authorities ordered both evangelists to accuse VGNM leaders of

illegally starting the organization and to accuse Pastor Mai Hong Sanh of

opening an illegal Bible school in Buonmathuot, sources said. The authorities

grew angry when they refused.

During Ksor's

pre-trial incarceration, police from the commune, district and province visited

his wife many times and pressured her to renounce her

Christian faith, sources said. She steadfastly refused. They tried to entice her by telling her that if the family recanted they would be provided a monthly sack of rice, a new house and that her husband would be released immediately.

Ksor's wife, A Le H'Gioi, attended the trial even though she had not been provided permission as required by Vietnamese law. She told church leaders that the presiding judge of the People's Court addressed the matter of their faith directly, asking her husband, "Do you still insist on following the religion?" The judge also asked him, "After serving in prison already, do you still insist on staying with the Vietnam Good News Mission?"

She said her husband answered that he would not give up his faith in God even if it meant death. Christian leaders said the line of questioning contradicted assertions that the conviction and sentencing of the two evangelists had nothing to do with religion.

VGNM leaders said there were many other irregularities in the arrest and trial of the two evangelists, such as authorities' failure to provide legal papers to their families as required by law.

**Land
Seized**

In another incident against Protestants this month, some 200 police, local defense forces and young thugs seized church land in Quang Ngai city in Central Vietnam on Nov. 11, assaulting the pastor's wife in the process.

The property belongs to the Vietnam Christian Mission, a church with full legal recognition since 2007. Though the Quang Ngai congregation has complete legal papers for the property, local authorities have been threatening to seize it for some time, according to the long-time pastor of the church, Nguyen Luan Ke.

Pastor Nguyen, in his early 80s, reported that the assailants assaulted his wife, causing her to faint and fall. Details and photos were posted on the *Nguoi Viet* Web site. Authorities seized two of Pastor Nguyen's sons and put them in a paddy wagon but left the door unlocked, a church source said.

The two men escaped, taking refuge in the parsonage along with other members of the pastor's family, and frantically phoned for help. One call reached a Christian leader who was in Hanoi. This leader alerted central government authorities, who promised to look into the incident. Pastor Nguyen said the mob withdrew at the end of the day, having terrified him and his family.

Vietnam has come

under heightened international scrutiny for the confiscation in May of a century-old Catholic cemetery in Con Dau, near Danang in central Vietnam, that resulted in one death. Authorities reportedly intend to turn the property over to a private company to build a tourist resort. The incident led to the flight of more than 40 Catholics to Thailand.

On Oct. 27, six parishioners were sentenced to prison, some for 12 months and some for nine. This event has garnered much more international publicity than the Protestant ones above.

In its annual report on religious freedom released on Nov. 17, the U.S. State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom pointed to some progress in Vietnam but devoted several pages to religious liberty violations, noticeably against Protestants.

Vietnam's state-controlled media reacted strongly. The Nov. 20 issue of *Lao Dong* (Workers) newspaper published an article entitled, "Abusing Religion Issues to Sabotage Vietnam." It described religion as connected with "imperialist and hostile forces."

The same day, *Nhan Dan* (People's Daily) accused the state department report of being

based on “distorted information.” It called on U.S. officials “to verify the events right in Vietnam,” the very thing many observers say U.S. diplomats in Vietnam do.

On Nov. 22, a *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People’s Army) article described critics of religious liberty abuses as “black hearts under the name of angels.”

Some observers believe that the Five-Year Communist Party Congress to take place in early 2011 is contributing to an uptick in harsh measures against religions and human rights activists.

Protestant church leaders in Vietnam lament that no officials who have taken heavy-handed actions against religious groups and their leaders have ever been called to account, thus violating Vietnam’s own laws and regulations.