

Vietnam Grants Last-Minute Permit for Christmas Event

HO CHI MINH CITY, (CDN) – Granted permission only five hours before a scheduled Christmas event, house church leaders turned an empty field into a rudimentary stadium and welcomed some 20,000 people for a time of worship and evangelism on Sunday (Dec. 26) in Vietnam's largest city.

The last-minute permission for the event in Ho Chi Minh City reflected the byzantine manner in which authorities have applied Vietnam's religions laws. The central government's Bureau of Religious Affairs (BRA) in Hanoi, the body charged with managing religion in communist Vietnam, gave permission for the event to the newly registered Vietnam Assemblies of God (AOG) organization in early December. The Vietnam AOG represents a large grouping of mostly unregistered house churches in the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF).

Organizers were grateful for the early permission this year – last year they received only 42 hours notice for an event that 40,000 people attended – but when the AOG superintendent, Pastor Duong Thanh Lam, and other VEF leaders began working out particulars with the Ho Chi Minh City BRA, they met with considerable resistance. After the Ho Chi Minh City BRA finally consented, church leaders said, the organizers found that landlords with potential venues, clearly under pressure, refused to rent them space.

The stand-off lasted until Christmas Day. Meantime, based on the permission from Hanoi, organizers sent invitations to many thousands of Christians in the city and surrounding provinces, and Christians were preparing to come with friends and neighbors to the event, sources said. Some 300 buses, each carrying 60 to 70 passengers, were to bring people from the provinces, they said.

By 11 a.m. on Christmas Day, in spite of official promises, the required permission papers had not yet been granted, church leaders said. Organizers debated whether to push ahead or call off the event – wondering whether communicating word of a cancellation was even possible at that point. Finally at 5 p.m., in an emergency meeting with the city's ruling People's Committee, they got a verbal go-ahead and a promise of a written permit.

They said this meant they had only 24 hours to build a perimeter around the field, bring in electricity and water, prepare sanitary facilities, set up chairs, erect a stage, and install the sound and lighting systems.

But the next morning – the Sunday of the planned event – authorities informed organizers that the permission was not for their program but only to provide a place where the buses and people could come so organizers could explain, apologize and send them home, sources said. Organizers said it was another in a series of deeply discouraging betrayals, but that many Christians in Vietnam and worldwide were praying fervently.

Just before noon, a church leader went to the BRA office in a last-ditch attempt to get written permission. He urged officials to think through the possible consequences of many thousands of people arriving in the city for a much anticipated event and finding nothing. Finally at 1 p.m., just five hours before the event was scheduled to start, the BRA issued written permission for a gathering of 5,000 people.

Permission at last in hand, organizers called and text-messaged the many people standing by to help set up to come to the venue in district 12. Sources said they came quickly, like a small army, encountering huge cement culverts and pilings on roads as they approached the venue. These had to be manually removed to allow buses and trucks to enter.

Too late now to set up properly, they said, they did only what was absolutely necessary. They brought in 14,000 chairs on flatbed trucks, and one of the trucks served as the stage. As a backdrop they had time only to put up a large red cross with a white border that, when lit, sources said, stood starkly and powerfully against the night sky.

Crews and volunteers worked feverishly erecting towers and installing sound and lighting systems. Christmas worshippers began arriving in large numbers at 5 p.m., even though people reported authorities had prevented a significant number of buses from embarking on their journey, and that others were intercepted and forced to turn around.

The program began only 30 minutes later than the announced start time of 6 p.m., which organizers regarded as a miracle, and people continued to pour into the venue until well after 7 p.m. while worship music was underway. Those attending enthusiastically participated in loud and joyful praise, and sources cited as especially moving a local choir of hundreds singing "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty."

As they did last year, the Jackson family of six from the United States sang at the rally. The state-controlled media had earlier given ample coverage to the unique sight of the Christian group giving away their CDs in a busy downtown area.

Pastor Ho Tan Khoa was well into his evangelistic message when the lights went out, although sources said that, miraculously, the sound system was not affected. Thousands of people in the crowd opened their cell phones, lighting the darkness with their digital candles. The failure – or cutting – of the electricity did affect the live video broadcast on , but within about 15 minutes power was restored.

After a song and prayer for healing, Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan asked those who wanted to follow Christ to come forward. Hundreds streamed up, and sources said those who arrived first

rushed onto the flatbed truck serving as a stage and clung to the large cross. Organizers estimated 2,000 people indicated a first-time decision to follow Christ.

In a fitting closing song, the Jackson family sang both in Vietnamese and English, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Pastor Duong Thanh Lam then graciously thanked the relevant government departments for "recognizing our need to worship" and for "creating the conditions for this event to happen."

Those who follow religion in Vietnam were puzzled that the government went to such lengths to hinder the gathering. They cited the government lock-out of a scheduled Christmas celebration in Hanoi on Dec. 19 as an example of interference that will also long be remembered (see , "Vietnam Authorities Move to Stop Protestant Christmas Events," Dec. 20).

"It seems Vietnam squandered an excellent public relations opportunity at a time when there are renewed efforts in the U.S. Congress to put Vietnam back on the religious liberty blacklist," said one long-time observer.

Some Vietnamese church leaders and international observers have said they believe officials have clamped down on Christmas celebrations this year because they were alarmed at the size of last year's Christmas events.

One church leader told Compass of Directive No. 75 of the Ministry of Interior, an Oct. 15 order that presumably forbids such gatherings. Though no church leader has been shown the directive, an official considered to be sympathetic to Christians told a pastor that the directive orders strict adherence to the Decree on Religion 22. This 2005 decree, the main law governing religion, forbids Christians in unregistered groups from any public gatherings, restricting their religious activity to single family worship in their household.

In practice, sources said, many house churches have experienced considerably more freedom than that. Last year many unregistered groups were allowed, though reluctantly, to hold large public Christmas gatherings in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

The unregistered house churches are becoming increasingly frustrated. Most have tried to register their congregations according to existing laws but have either been refused or ignored. The freedoms that members of registered churches enjoy are not available for unregistered Christians, sources said, and unregistered Christians are unable to register.

Many speculate that concern over security in the run-up to the January 2011 Party Congress, held every five years, is one reason for the government's approach. Whatever the reason, all concerned church leaders agreed that the efforts to stop the large Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City Christmas events this year were ordered from the top level of government. No leaders said they believe the obstacles resulted merely from disagreements and delays among government departments, as it was sometimes made to appear.

A number of other events held in public venues by the registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) went ahead peacefully. The largest one in Ho Chi Minh City on Dec. 17 attracted an estimated 9,000 people, with about 1,000 indicating a desire to follow Christ.

In some places, unregistered house church organizations held small Christmas events without difficulty. According to one count, at least 6,000 people throughout Vietnam indicated a first-time decision to follow Christ in this year's Christmas events.