

Christian Grandmother, 3 Others Arrested in the Middle of Church

Police burst into a gathering of Christians in Laos, arresting a grandmother and three other believers as they worshipped in November according to a report by Morning Star News.

Authorities raided the church in Keovilai village, located in Savannakhet Province, on Nov. 18, arresting the 78-year-old grandmother, Bounlam, and three men identified by the surnames Duangtha, Khampan and Ponsawan.

The report received by Morning Star originated with the Human Rights Watcher for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

The three men were held in handcuffs and foot stocks. Police also evicted them from their homes and property, according to HRWLRF.

Villagers said they were arrested because of their belief in Jesus Christ and will face unspecified criminal charges. All four have since been released. Bounlam was released first, because she needed treatment for a heart condition.

Area Christians said police have threatened more severe punishment if the Lao Christians do not renounce Christianity, which is considered an enemy of the single-party, Marxist-Leninist country, according to the HRWLRF.

HRWLRF urged the Lao government to punish the three police officers "who acted illegally in arresting the four Christians," and called for their homes to be restored to them.

The group urged the Lao government to respect the religious rights of the Lao people as guaranteed in the Lao constitution

and the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Laos in 2009. It upholds the individual's right to adopt a religion/belief of choice as well as the right to manifest that religion/belief in corporate worship.

"Any form of coercion impairing the freedom to have and manifest one's religion/belief of choice is condemned in the Covenant," HRWLRF noted.

The Lao government officially recognizes the religious umbrella groups for Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and the Baha'i, but the only officially recognized Christian denominations are the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church, according to the U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report of 2017.

Government restrictions on registered and unregistered minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, remained "disproportionately limiting in certain remote regions," according to the report.

"Reports continued of authorities, especially in isolated villages, arresting, detaining, and exiling followers of minority religions, particularly Christians," it states. "There were reports authorities subjected some religious minority members to attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, arrest, detention and fines." {eo}

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