

Christians Deprived of Food, Water in Laos at 'Critical Stage'

A total of 62 Christians forced from their village to crude shelters at the edge of the jungle in Saravan Province, Laos, are at a "critical stage" from lack of food and water, an advocacy group warned.

"The wells are drying up as they are going into the dry season, and their food supplies are exhausted" after villagers thwarted their attempts to plant new crops, a source from Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) told Compass. "The authorities have successfully gotten them into a situation where they feel defeated."

Officials marched 11 Christian families, totaling 48 people, out of Katin village in Ta-Oih Province at gunpoint in January 2010 after they repeatedly refused to give up their faith. The officials left them to find shelter about six kilometers (nearly four miles) outside the village and confiscated the Christians' homes, livestock, and essential registration documents.

Late last year, the 11 families planted rice out of season on commonly-owned village land to sustain themselves and avoid losing hereditary rights to their plots. On Dec. 26, however, village officials and former neighbors drained water from the plots, stamped on the rice seedlings and burned fences, leaving any remaining plants vulnerable to wandering bulls. (See, "Lao Officials Destroy Rice Paddies, Expel More Christians," Dec. 29, 2010.)

The Christians then cleared an area near their camp for subsistence farming, but unknown persons burned their seed and farming equipment, HRWLRF reported.

“Villagers overheard authorities saying that the hardships caused by lack of food will eventually force the Christians to abandon their faith,” the HRWLRF source said. “At this point they’re going to stay where they are. But since they’re primarily farmers with no other skills, we’re certain that they cannot survive without outside assistance.”

Village officials have refused to allow the Christians to return to their former farmland.

At least two of the expelled villagers were hospitalized last April after a prolonged lack of clean drinking water, adequate food or housing, HRWLRF reported, and another man identified only as Ampheng died suddenly while praying for them.

The Katin village chief and other local authorities armed with guns forced a further seven Christian families, totaling 15 people, to leave the village on Dec. 23. The 11 families welcomed them and built additional shelters for them, though that put increased pressure on their limited food and water supplies.

The expulsions in January 2010 and December 2010 followed months of threats and torment, beginning with the confiscation and slaughter of livestock and the death by asphyxiation of a Christian villager identified only as Pew in July 2008. The villagers had converted to Christianity in May of that year. Immediately after Pew’s death, authorities incarcerated 80 men, women and children in a school compound without food until they signed documents renouncing their faith.

In 2009, however, they began worshiping again in private homes, raising the ire of authorities and leading to the first expulsion in 2010.

“Breaking the Law”

By mid-February some of the Katin Christians had resorted to begging for food, a common practice among the homeless and destitute in Laos. But as one source told HRWLRF, authorities

warned the residents of Katin and neighboring villages in Ta-Oih district not to assist the Christians as they were “breaking the law” by following Christ, even though the Lao constitution provides for freedom of worship.

Provincial officials in March 2010 assured the Christians that they had every right to remain in Katin village; in July the provincial authorities asked Katin officials to respect the constitution and other regulations that provide for religious freedom in Laos.

When village officials responded by threatening to shoot any Christian who returned, district and provincial officials made no further efforts to protect the families or relocate them.

In spite of these failed interventions, two additional families professed faith in Christ after the January 2010 evictions, another four families in July, and a further family in October after Katin officials warned that the previous six families would be evicted in January 2011 if they held to their beliefs. (See, “Officials to Expel More Christian Families from Village,” Nov. 9, 2010.)

Officials eventually rounded up the seven families and expelled them on Dec. 23, 2010. The incident was reported to the Ta-Oih district religious affairs office, but staff members there failed to respond.