

Forced Recantations of Faith Continue in Vietnam

✖ A Vietnamese man violently forced to recant his fledgling Christian faith faces pressure from authorities and clansmen to prove his return to traditional Hmong belief by sacrificing to ancestors next month.

Sung Cua Po, who embraced Christianity in November, received some 70 blows to his head and back after local officials in northwest Vietnam's Dien Bien Province arrested him on Dec. 1, 2009, according to documents obtained by Compass. His wife, Hang thi Va, was also beaten. They live in Ho Co village.

Dien Bien Dong District and Na Son Commune police and soldiers led by policeman Hang A Senh took the Christian couple to the Na Son Commune People's Committee office after police earlier incited local residents to abuse and stone them and other Christian families. After Po and his wife were beaten at 1 a.m. that night, he was fined 8 million dong (US\$430) and a pig of at least 16 kilos. His cell phone and motorbike were confiscated, according to the documents.

Christians Sung A Sinh and Hang A Xa of Trung Phu village were also beaten about the head and back and fined a pig of 16 kilos each so that local authorities could eat, according to the reports. The documents stated that the reason for the mistreatment of the Christians was that they abandoned "the good and beautiful" traditional Hmong beliefs and practices to follow Protestant Christianity.

Christian sources reported that on Dec. 15 police took Po and his wife to members of their extended family, who applied severe clan pressure on him to deny their faith. When police added their own threats, Po finally signed recantation documents.

"I folded – I signed when police threatened to beat me to death if I didn't recant," he said. "Then they would seize my property, leaving my wife a widow, and my children fatherless – without a home."

Following Po's written recantation, authorities subjected him to further family and clan pressure and "fines," as well as rites to satisfy traditional Hmong spirits said to have become upset when he offended them by becoming a Christian.

Po faces the ultimate test to prove his recantation is sincere on Feb. 13, Lunar New Year's Eve. He remains under severe threat, the documents report, unless he voluntarily offers sacrifices to his ancestors at that time.

The documentation of the forced recantations in northwest Vietnam indicates authorities are contravening Vietnam's 2004/2005 public religion policy.

All three men had received a summons dated Dec. 11, 2009 to appear at the Na Son Commune Peoples' Committee office at 7:30 a.m. on Dec. 15 "to take care of business relating to following the Vang Chu religion."

The officials' use of the Vang Chu religion in these documents was said to be significant. Vang Chu is a mythological Hmong savior who, it is believed, will unite and deliver the Hmong. For some time Vietnamese authorities have deliberately misnamed Protestantism as Vang Chu in order to give Christianity a threatening political character. Any real or imagined political opposition provides Vietnamese communists with a carte blanche excuse to apply repressive measures, Christian sources said.

One of the other Christians arrested, Xa, has received another summons handwritten by the chief of Trung Phu village, Hang A Po, "to solve the issue of the Vang Chu religion." The summons ordered Xa to appear without fail at the home of village chief Po in mid-December and to bring sufficient food, including a

15-to-20 kilo pig, to feed everyone.

“Here is Vietnamese jungle justice on full display – show up at the home of an official to be tormented and bring plenty of food and liquor for your tormentors,” observed one source.

The summons purports to represent district and commune police who will be present, as well as the village chief.

“It is clear that in spite of public national policies outlawing forced recantation, to the contrary, Dien Bien government policy to force new Christian believers to recant is being vigorously implemented,” said one source.

This conclusion is consistent with other findings. In November 2009 religious liberty advocates acquired a Vietnamese language booklet entitled “Some Documents Concerning Religious Belief and Religion.” The 104-page document “For Internal Circulation” was published in November 2007 by the Dien Bien Province Department of Ethnic Minorities.

The collection of documents, including some marked “Secret,” clearly shows Dien Bien religion policies and directives relative to Protestants are different than the “new religion legislation” of 2004/2005. The Dien Bien documents reveal a secret “Guidance Committee 160” is overseeing repressive policies initiated before the new religion legislation of 2004/2005 that continue to guide officials.

“These events and findings in Dien Bien clearly show that the excuse given by our government that such events are isolated exceptions perpetrated by a few bad officials is not believable,” said one church leader.