

House Church Leaders Attacked Near Hanoi, Vietnam

A gang of men attacked leaders of a Baptist house church network near Hanoi on Nov. 13, leaving one pastor unconscious and seriously injuring several others, including women and teenage children.

Leaders of the Agape Baptist Church were participating in a spiritual renewal meeting at the home of pastor Nguyen Danh Chau in Lai Tao village, Bot Xuyen commune, My Duc district, when the gang intruded at 9:30 a.m., sources said. Beating people and smashing property, the gang seriously injured more than a dozen participants and warned Nguyen Danh Chau that they would kill him if he continued gathering Christians, the sources in Vietnam said.

With the attack underway, the sources said, some gang members ran outside and announced to the neighborhood, "Oh heavens, the Christian pastors are savagely beating up people!" This attracted a large crowd, which the gang hoped would prevent any Christians from escaping.

The seriously injured Christians included five male pastors, four female pastors and other church leaders, and several of the leaders' teenage children. The worst wounded, Nguyen Danh Chau, lay unconscious for many hours, and as of midnight Tuesday, he was still suffering severe chest, stomach and head pain.

One pastor's wife, Nguyen Thi Lan, was still unable to walk and function normally at press time after she was struck in the stomach and groin. Others remained weak from loss of blood. The Christians were punched in the mouth and face, the chest and the back. Some were savagely kicked as they lay on the floor.

The denomination's top leader, Nguyen Cong Thanh, who rushed up from the south to visit the beleaguered leaders, reported that he planned to take the injured to a nearby hospital today; he feared, however, that he would encounter resistance. When doctors in Vietnam learn that religious motives play a role in violence, commonly they do not dare to treat or even examine the victims of persecution.

Attacking on the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, observed worldwide by thousands of churches affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance, the gang smashed a dozen plastic chairs, overturned a pulpit and tore a cross from the wall and threw it into a nearby pond, leaving no doubt as to their motivation. They also stole valuable parts from four motorcycles belonging to the pastors before smashing the remainder of the vehicles. Valued at more than \$1,000 each, the motorbikes represent a huge loss for the church leaders.

Before leaving, the gang stopped long enough to destroy the family's kitchen garden and fruit trees, sources said.

The Agape Baptist Church is an unregistered house church organization of some 2,200 members who worship regularly in 38 congregations. It was established in 2007. Many of the congregations are located in or near Hanoi and nearby provinces.

Agape Baptist Church head Nguyen Cong Thanh said in a statement Tuesday morning that he had met with the injured.

"All they could do was weep, and I also could not prevent my tears from flowing," he said. "Why do they gratuitously beat servants of the Lord like this? What crime have they committed, what enemies have they made? All we want to do is gather people to worship and serve God and our fellowman. And not only that, the gang destroyed four motorcycles and stole safety helmets, shoes and rain coats from people with very

modest means. God have mercy!"

In the past few years, official policy toward religion in Vietnam is ostensibly more tolerant than it was previously, so it has become a pattern for police and higher authorities to employ gangs for such anti-Christian attacks, according to Christian leaders in Vietnam. The gang members are rarely identified and never prosecuted.

Vietnam's ranking among countries with persecution of Christians slipped slightly on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2011 World Watch List. With No. 1 being the worst, Vietnam's place on the list deteriorated from No. 21 to number No. 18 last year.