

Lao Authorities Arrest Christians for Evangelizing

Authorities in a village in northern Laos have ordered all Christian residents to cease meeting for worship in private homes following the arrest of four Christians on July 10, rights advocates said.

Also on July 10, police arrested a Christian in Luang Prabang Province, ordering him to abandon his faith or face imprisonment, according to a statement from the advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom.

In Luang Namtha Province, Pastor Seng Aroun of Kon church in Namtha district, and three other Christians from Sounya village church identified only as Souchiad, Naikwang and Kofa had met at Kofa's house for Sunday worship on July 10, HRWLRF reported. Kofa had also asked them for advice regarding a vehicle accident in May in which he had unwittingly caused the death of another person.

After the service, provincial authorities arrested all four men and detained them at Luang Namtha's provincial prison. On July 13 they released all but Pastor Aroun, who remained in detention at press time, and ordered all Christians in Sounya village to cease meeting in private homes for worship, according to HRWLRF.

Christians in Sounya village have faced opposition from authorities since the initial conversion of some 400 residents in 2002. Since then police have conducted three waves of arrests of core church leaders. In 2009, two truckloads of police and military personnel tore down the Sounya church building, and authorities banned Christians from gathering for worship.

In 2010, the Christians began meeting occasionally in small

groups. By January they were once again able to meet in private homes for Sunday worship, HRWLRF reported, but that limited freedom has now been removed.

'Spreading a Foreign Religion'

In Luang Prabang Province, police on July 10 approached Vong Veu, a Christian resident of Pookong village, and ordered him to abandon his faith and return to traditional spirit worship or animism. When Veu refused, officers arrested him and detained him without trial at Viengkham district prison, where he remained at press time, HRWLRF reported.

In March a group of new Christians in Pookong had asked Abee Weng, an elder of Fasouk Church in Luang Prabang city, to assist them in practicing the faith. Weng, along with three other church members identified only as Pachua, Boulevang and Kae, came to Pookong on March 28 and instructed the new converts to burn or destroy items associated with spirit worship, according to HRWLRF.

District police arrested Weng and his assistants as they returned home on March 29 and charged them with "spreading a foreign religion and eradicating Lao traditional religion," though Weng asserted that he had not converted the group but had simply responded to their request for instruction. Police then held the men at Viengkham district prison until, four days later, provincial religious affairs and police officers intervened and secured their release, HRWLRF reported.

As the former ancient capital of Laos, the city of Luang Prabang is a World Heritage site. In the early 1990s officials heavily persecuted Christians in the surrounding province under the pretext of "preserving" that heritage. More recently the provincial religious affairs office has publicly relaxed its policies, but district officials have maintained their oppression of those who follow non-traditional religions, particularly Christianity.

In Udomsai Province, HRWLRF has also drawn attention to the case of 58-year-old Bounchan Kanthavong of Vanghai village, who is nearing the end of a 12-year prison sentence issued in 1999 following his conversion to Christianity and bold preaching of the faith. In April, Kanthavong told his wife, Sengkham, during a prison visit that officials recently said they were willing to release him if he renounced the Christian faith and separated from her; Sengkham is now the leading figure in Vangsai village's Protestant church.

Kanthavong warned Sengkham just days before his arrest in June 1999 that officials were likely to seize him because of his Christian activities; shortly thereafter they arrested him, but on charges of "treason and sedition." An investigation by his wife and others revealed that the charges were based on Kanthavong's participation in a Bible training seminar and on his leading role in the conversion of at least 70 people to Christianity. These actions allegedly made them answerable to a "foreign power" instead of the Lao authorities.

Following Kanthavong's arrest, his wife took over leadership of the small Christian community, which today has grown to over 3,000 people.

HRWLRF has urged the Lao government to reconsider Kanthavong's conviction and release him immediately on grounds that his exercise of religious freedom in 1999 was guaranteed by the Lao constitution and should not have been deemed an act of treason or sedition.

Wanna and Yohan

In Khammouan Province, pastors Wanna and Yohan, both identified only by a single name, also remain behind bars despite an eight-point appeal by the Center for Public Policy Analysis in Washington, D.C. and a coalition of international NGOs in March, just prior to the ninth Lao Communist Party Congress. Only Wanna is specifically named in the statement.

"We are appealing to the Lao government to immediately release Pastor Wanna and others who seek political reform and religious freedom in Laos," one of the signatories, Bounthanh Rathigna, president of the United League for Democracy in Laos, said in a press statement.

The fourth point of the appeal called for the government to "cease religious freedom violations, persecution and harassment of independent Laotian and Hmong Christian, Animist and Buddhist believers, including Laotian Christian Pastor Wanna, who has been repeatedly arrested and beaten along with other Lao Christian believers."

Arrested on Jan. 4, Wanna and Yohan along with eight other Christians, including two children, were officially charged with "gathering for the purpose of creating turbulent unrest."

Both Wanna and Yohan's children have faced abuse and rejection from other children in their villages due to their fathers' detentions, according to a spokesman from HRWLRF.

The spokesman said Wanna is no longer in solitary confinement.

"At the beginning he was in solitary confinement, but now he's living among the others, and he's being let out to get some air," the spokesman told Compass. Due to weakness possibly caused by malnutrition, he said, "a doctor is also treating him with antibiotics, glucose and saline through an intravenous drip in the prison."

The chief of Nakoon village has also visited Wanna's wife, Champa, and advised her and her children to reject Christ-counsel she has firmly ignored, the spokesman said.