

Lao Officials Force Christians to Recant for Burial

Officials this week forced Christians in a Lao village to give up their faith in order to bury a family member in the village graveyard, according to advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

In Huey, Ad-Sapangthong district of Savannakhet Province, where immediate burial is essential in the hot tropical climate, the village's eight Christian families quickly began to arrange a funeral for the deceased, a woman who died on Christmas Day who went by the single name of Wang. On Dec. 26, however, village officials ordered that her body be buried according to Buddhist funeral rites or be taken to a burial ground in Savannakhet city, HRWLRF reported.

Lacking the resources for a city burial, the 40 Christians reluctantly agreed. But the village monk then refused to carry out the ceremony because Wang was a Christian.

On Dec. 27, district officials summoned representatives of the Christian community in Huey to their headquarters in Ad-Sapangthong. HRWLRF reported that one of them told the Christians, "Don't do anything with the dead body; let the body rot if you insist on clinging to the Christian faith."

With Wang's body already decomposing, the Christians verbally agreed to cease practicing their faith in order to bury her in the village cemetery, according to HRWLRF.

Once the funeral was over, five of the families told church leaders in another city that they regretted their decision and that they would continue to worship God.

On Dec. 28, sources close to district officials told HRWLRF that they suspected two people were directly responsible for the refusal of a Christian burial in Huey village as well as the Dec. 16 arrests of eight Christian leaders for gathering some 200 church members for a Christmas celebration in Boukham village. They identified the two as Major Gad, a former military officer now serving as deputy district chief of Ad-Sapangthong and also as head of religious affairs in the district; and the district commissioner, identified by the single name Pornsai.

Still in Stocks

Following the release of one of the Christian leaders, Boukham village authorities have moved six of the detained Christians to an animal pen, blocked visits from family members and banned direct delivery of food, local sources told HRWLRF.

Another detainee had been released temporarily to attend a government training session, but he is now being held with the others. The seven Christians are being held in wooden stocks.

When last seen, the health of one of the detained leaders, identified as Puphet, had clearly deteriorated; Puphet suffers from a kidney ailment. The legs of six of the detainees, but particularly those of Puphet, Wanta and Oun, were swollen and infected, according to HRWLRF.

"This is because their legs, being fastened in wooden stocks, are raised higher than their bottoms, obstructing blood flow," a spokesman from HRWLRF told Compass. "The stocks are also causing excruciating physical pain and bruises."

Family members fear that authorities may employ starvation tactics in order to force the six to give up their faith, the spokesman added.

In neighboring Natoo village, 47 Christians threatened with expulsion on Dec. 21 were able to worship on Christmas day without interruption, the spokesman said. Officials have yet

to carry out the threatened expulsion.