

Laos Police Arrest 3 Pastors for Spreading the Gospel

Three Christian pastors in Laos have been arrested and detained for “spreading the Christian religion” by reproducing a DVD of a Christian film. Pastor Bounma of Alowmai Village Church, Pastor Somkaew of Kengsainoi Village Church and Pastor Bounmee of Savet Village Church, were arrested on 5 February 2013 by the Phin District police in Savannakhet province.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s (CSW) sources, the pastors took a DVD copy of a film about the end times to a shop in Phin District market in order to make three copies. After the copies were made, the owner of the shop, along with the three pastors, tested one of the DVDs and watched the film through to the end. While they were watching, a police officer came to the shop and saw the shop owner and the pastors watching the film. The police officer then contacted his superior, Lieutenant Khamvee, who came to the shop accompanied by two deputies. The police arrested the three pastors and took the shop owner to the police station for further questioning. The shop owner was later released without charge.

During their interrogation, the pastors claimed that the three copies were for their own use, but the authorities insisted that they were “spreading the Christian religion” through the film. The three pastors are currently being detained in Phin district prison.

Although Article 30 of the 1991 Lao Constitution guarantees citizens the right to “believe or not to believe in religions,” the 2002 “Decree Regarding Governance and Protection of Religious Activity in the Lao PDR” (Prime Minister’s Decree No. 92/PM) places significant restrictions on the activities of religious believers.

Article 14 of the Decree states that the printing of books, documents for dissemination, signs and various plates related to religion must be authorized by the Ministry of Information and Culture with the approval of the Central Committee of the Lao Front for National Construction. It goes on to say, "It is forbidden for believers in the Lao PDR to publish or possess books, documents, photographs, signs, video cassettes, VCD, films or other media having characteristics of superstitions...or distortions of truth". In this case, the film in question can be found in other shops in Savannakhet province, which suggests that either the film has been approved by the authorities, or that the local authorities have turned a blind eye to the sale of the film in other areas.

"CSW is deeply concerned about these arrests, which highlight the restrictions placed on the reproduction and dissemination of religious materials," says CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston. "The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Laos in 2009, protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the public manifestation of religion and the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds in any media. We urge the Lao authorities to release the three men immediately and to lift restrictions on the reproduction and dissemination of religious materials, in line with its obligations under the ICCPR."