

Police-Sponsored Thugs Attack Church in Central Vietnam

Thugs said to be doing the bidding of local authorities attacked a pastor and his family with iron bars and wooden clubs in central Vietnam on Oct. 23, seriously injuring the heads and arms of the church leader's father and other relatives, sources said.

Twice on the same Sunday that local authorities disrupted a house church service in Phu Quy village near Tam Ky, Quang Nam Province, a gang of about 20 men attacked the father, brother and other family members of pastor Thien An, who was locked in a secure room as his family believed the gang sought to kill him, sources said.

Police had visited his home the week prior to "investigate" the house church, whose application for registration authorities have twice denied, according to the pastor. Church members echoed the sentiment of one Christian that "even a child" could figure out the connection between the gang and the public security police who disrupted their service that morning.

Pastor Thien told the officers he would meet with them after the service, but they barged into the meeting and pulled the plug on the sound system, according to a letter distributed on the Internet from pastor Thien addressed to "all in the world with a conscience." When church members protested, one officer yelled and threatened to hit the pastor's father, according to his report.

After some time, the "angry police officers, full of threats, left our house of prayer," according to the pastor.

The report said that at 1 p.m. the same day, some 20 gang members, many of them large and sporting tattoos, came to the

house church when only the pastor and his extended family were home. Believing the gang had come to murder the pastor, his family urged him to retreat into a secure, locked interior room.

As the gang members struck his father, brother and others trying to defend the pastor and his family, which included a 1-week-old infant boy, the family prayed hard even as they vigorously resisted. Finally the gang left on their motorcycles threatening to return to “bring this house of God to the ground, and kill all of you,” the pastor reported.

During the attack, pastor Thien called four levels of police and security officials, but, strangely, no one answered. After the gang left, he called the chief of the provincial police department and secured a promise to investigate.

Alerted by cellphone, church members rushed to the house to support the pastor and his family and prayed with them. Assuming things had settled down, they left in the early evening. But at 8:30 p.m., as the family was locked into their home, they were alarmed at the sound of shouting and breaking glass.

Pastor Thien was anxious to defend his family, but they restrained him from going out to confront the gang, saying he was their main target. As the gang wielding iron bars and wooden clubs viciously attacked pastor Thien’s father and several others outside the secure room in which the pastor and his family were locked, gang members stationed outside prevented anyone from coming to help.

The gang managed to smash the glass of the door to the secure room, but Pastor Thien’s father, younger brother and an uncle miraculously managed to fend off the attackers, who finally retreated with their weapons, according to the report. Calls to various police offices during this attack also went unanswered, the pastor added.

Photos taken after this attack and posted on YouTube show head wounds on the defenders, blood on the floor and smashed windows. They also record the loud, anguished prayers for justice. Pastor Thien's younger brother collapsed when the gang retreated and announced he was about to die, but the pastor prayed for him, and some five minutes later he was revived.

The house church, part of the Vietnam Baptist Church (VBC), is the larger of two legally registered denominations related to the U.S. Southern Baptist Church. Though the denomination is fully and nationally registered, local officials apparently consider the well-established congregation in Phu Quy village to be illegal.

The pastor, who reported that local authorities had refused two attempts to register his church, stated that police have summoned some of his members, especially young women, and strongly pressured them to stop worshipping there; some succumbed to serious threats and signed documents pledging to do so.

Police also recently summoned the pastor and warned that if he continued convening worship, they would not take responsibility if someone attacked it, he reported.

The Quang Nam provincial leader of the VBC contacted by Compass did not visit the affected church until the following Sunday (Oct. 30). He confirmed the incident had taken place and said the church met without incident that day.

Pastor Thien's superior said he would try again to help the church to register with local authorities.

Several days after the attack, top officials of the VBC in Ho Chi Minh City reported that they had not received pastor Thien's appeal and seemed oddly reluctant to publicly support their beleaguered congregation in Tam Ky. Reliable sources told Compass that the leaders' reluctance stemmed from fear of

confronting authorities and putting at risk what they consider a good relationship with the government.

The pastor's appeal and the subsequent YouTube clips, however, were widely distributed by other church leaders in Vietnam who were incensed and sickened by the blatant attack on fellow Christian worshippers.

"Even if there were irregularities on the church side in the registration process, it could in no way justify such a brutal attack in which government authorities are complicit," one house church leader in Vietnam told Compass. "But this is still our country's version of rule-of-law."