

Vietnamese Authorities Stop Hanoi Easter Celebrations

✖ Authorities in Vietnam prevented much-anticipated public Easter celebrations in Hanoi planned for Friday and Saturday (April 15-16) after giving a verbal promise to organizers that the events would proceed.

An interchurch organizing committee had submitted a request for permission well in advance and had made elaborate preparations for the special events featuring renowned evangelist Luis Palau.

The organizers said they were disappointed but not entirely surprised by the Communist government's action.

"The authorities have clearly demonstrated to the world what we experience regularly—that their promises, whether verbal or written, cannot be trusted," said one church leader who requested anonymity.

Asked to speculate on the reasons for the government's ultimate refusal, another key church leader said, "I don't know why, but it almost seems as if the government is deliberately damaging its own reputation."

Shortly after 1 p.m. on Friday (April 15), after long negotiations, authorities gave verbal assent for the events to proceed, promising the required written permission would be issued imminently. The government-approved venue was the Dien Kinh My Dinh Sports Complex, a state-of-the-art indoor track and field stadium in Hanoi's Tu Liem district. It reportedly holds 3,100 people; organizers had requested a place with considerably larger capacity.

After receiving the verbal promise, organizers said they went directly to the sports complex hoping to begin preparing the

sound and lighting systems. They were not given access.

When no written permission was forthcoming by the scheduled start at 7 p.m., organizers said they were forced to turn away many hundreds of people arriving from the provinces by chartered buses. They urged the people to return home quietly and to pray for the event scheduled for the next evening, they said.

Very late Friday evening, the organizing committee received written permission from the Hanoi People's Committee to hold what was to have been the second night of the event on Saturday (April 16). They immediately posted the document on Vietnam's most popular Christian website , they said.

Apparently, however, public security and city authorities quietly overrode the reluctant permission granted by Vietnam's religion bureaucracy. Organizers told Compass that even with the official letter from the People's Committee, several hurdles had remained. They had still needed to secure a contract from the sports complex on Saturday morning for use of the facilities, and they had yet to request the Committee for Religious Affairs for permission for Palau to speak.

Early on Saturday, Pastor Nguyen Huu Mac, president of the registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), or ECVN(N), who had signed the request, went with colleagues from unregistered house churches to the sports complex to pursue the contract. When they were told that Saturday was not a work day, they went to the Tu Liem district office.

There they were stalled for several more hours by fruitless discussion. District officials eventually told them that although the sports complex was in their area of the city, it was owned and managed by another entity over which they had no control.

Finally, at 1 p.m., the manager of the sports complex arrived. He proceeded to give the organizing committee what Christian

leaders described as unreasonable conditions for a contract. For instance, the manager said they could not enter the complex to prepare until 4:30 p.m.—hardly enough time for the scheduled 7 p.m. start. Organizers said he further told them that the sports complex would retain control over who and how many entered the building; he said they would not honor the tickets/invitations that had been widely distributed by the event organizers but would distribute their own and count every head.

The organizers sensed trouble.

Faced with such government duplicity and control over their event and without enough time to set up properly, church leaders said, they unanimously decided they could not proceed with integrity. Shortly after 4 p.m., they issued an indefinite postponement notice.

Reached by Compass late Saturday Hanoi time, a Luis Palau Association spokesman reported that the evangelist had just spent significant time encouraging the tired organizers. Palau told them that the Lord would bless them for their diligence and predicted that they would soon reap a great spiritual harvest. In a few years, he said, they would look on the disappointments of this weekend as insignificant, according to the spokesman.

Despite their disappointment, church leaders took note of gains: The effort to stage the events, they said, marked unprecedented cooperation among various groups, with the ECVN(N), the only registered church based in the north, applying for the permission document on behalf of all groups. Cooperating in the organizing were northern house churches belonging to the Hanoi Christian Fellowship and southern-based house churches belonging to the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, as well as some smaller groups.

Together, the church leaders said, they determined not to bow

to government manipulation and pressure.

“Clearly someone at the top disallowed these events and then left it to clumsy underlings to create bureaucratic obstacles,” said a long-time overseas Vietnam analyst. “Most people will see through this ruse and recognize simple lack of religious freedom.”

In Ho Chi Minh City, similar Easter celebrations were given last-minute approval and went ahead the previous weekend with considerable response to Palau’s messages.

It is not known if or how the cancellation of the events in Hanoi will affect plans for the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, both the northern and southern entities, to include Palau in their June centennial celebrations in Danang, Hanoi, and Ho Chi Minh City.

Permission has been long requested, but so far the government has only given general verbal approval.