

# Vietnamese Officials Destroy Two New Church Buildings

Vietnamese officials in Muong Cha district, Dien Bien Province, destroyed two new church buildings of ethnic minority Hmong Christians this month and threatened to tear down a third.

The Ho He Church, erected in April by the unregistered Vietnam Good News Mission, was demolished on June 17. The Phan Ho Church of the registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) was destroyed on June 13, 2012. The church threatened with demolition, The Cong Church, also belongs to the Vietnam Good News Mission.

These congregations of 500 to 600 people, which began as house churches, had long outgrown even the largest home, so the Hmong had sacrificed and worked to erect wooden worship buildings. As local police, paramilitary forces and other authorities descended on the church buildings by the dozens, the Christians could only watch with deep sadness and frustration as the houses of worship were reduced to rubble and government promises about freedom of religion were again broken, area sources said.

The Hmong Christian movement in Vietnam's Northwest Mountainous Region has grown from nothing to some 400,000 believers in the last two decades. The Hmong Christians remain under heavy government suspicion and are regularly objects of harassment and sometimes outright persecution.

According to a trusted Compass source, these incidents, among other things, demonstrate the dysfunction of the government's church registration regime. New regulations on church registration were promulgated in 2004 and 2005, ostensibly to expand **religious freedom** and move Vietnam from an ideological

opposition to religion to a managerial approach.

Particularly promising was the Prime Minister's Special Directive No. 1 Regarding Protestantism. It promised quick registration for local congregations to carry on religious activity while larger issues were being worked out.

Since this legislation appeared, nine Protestant denominations have received legal recognition. They report that the disclosure required in the registration process, however, has led to more government scrutiny and has not reduced long waiting times for routine permissions.

Yet more than half of Vietnam's Protestants remain unregistered, with many seeing their prospects for becoming legally recognized as hopeless. Hundreds of congregations have tried to apply for registration under the Prime Minister's Special Directive, only to have officials simply refuse to accept the applications. Others who apply to register are told they cannot because they are not legal, or that they can't register because there are no Christians where they live.

If the registration request is received, sources said, it often goes unanswered for years, contrary to time limits for government reply in the legislation. Christian leaders who have long tried to register their congregations say that fewer than 5 percent have been granted permission to carry on religious activities.

As a result, sources said, large numbers of congregations remain subject to various kinds of harassment and sometimes arbitrary closure. Authorities tell denominational leaders they may not visit their churches, or even their pastors, because they are not legal.

The large Catholic Church in Vietnam regularly finds its congregations in tension with local authorities. On June, 18, for example, the archdiocese of Vinh published on a Catholic website a letter, directed to all levels of government, about

the persecution of Christians in Chau Binh Commune in Nghe An Province.

When a priest arrived in the commune to bless a new home, many officials gathered to prevent the ceremony. They shouted abuse at the Catholics and hurled rotten eggs at an altar prepared for the house-blessing ceremony. The following night, thugs invaded the home of Tran Van Luong, a Catholic who had dared object to the officials' conduct, and beat him, his wife and three others, sources said.

The five required emergency medical aid, and Luong's wife was still drifting in and out of consciousness at the time the letter was written.

The letter from the archdiocese specifies in detail how the officials' conduct violates the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the constitution of Vietnam, as well as Vietnam's new religion legislation and its criminal code. It concludes with an appeal for a prompt investigation to provide justice.

Rarely does the government of Vietnam respond to such petitions, sources said; instead, it often vilifies the petitioners.

An official news release on a high-level meeting about the effectiveness of the Prime Minister's Special Directive No. 1, issued on Feb. 28 in Vietnamese, was likely more telling than intended; the official English-language report on the meeting used other language entirely. In the Vietnamese version, an official of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs said the directive had provided a "breakthrough" in the government's management of religion by "limiting the unusually rapid development of the Protestant religion."

Thus, the very instrument that was publicized locally and internationally as proof of Vietnam's liberalizing religion

policy apparently had contrary purposes.

At the same meeting, a deputy prime minister announced the appointment of General Pham Dung of the Ministry of Public Security as the new head of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs. According to Vietnamese Protestant leaders, this was not a heartening development.

Vietnam was ranked 19th on the 2012 World Watch List of the 50 countries where persecution is worst, as determined by Christian support organization Open Doors.