

Vietnamese Pastor Fights Church Crackdowns

In spite of the Vietnamese government's recent willingness to allow public rallies with evangelists like Luis Palau, the country has a history of persecuting Christian believers.

In recent years, tourists have turned Vietnam into a popular tourist destination. But for Vietnamese citizens who want to exercise freedom of speech or religion, the government's intolerance can be dangerous.

On a Sunday morning in Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City, many church services seem normal. Some songs are even translated from English. But a hidden camera recently showed government officials raiding a Saigon church building, breaking up a service held by an Assemblies of God congregation.

The reason for the raid? Officials said the worshippers didn't have permission to meet.

In communist Vietnam, Christianity isn't illegal-nor is any other religion. But the government's actions don't always align with the law.

Rev. Nguyen Hong Quang is a Mennonite pastor who has become a thorn in the flesh of Vietnam's ruling party. As a trained lawyer Quang has challenged the government repeatedly on its violations of religious freedoms. In the last 20 years, he's been arrested repeatedly and imprisoned, slandered in newspapers, and followed by police.

"They follow me for the last 20 years, but in this period it's more intense," Quang said from a safe house in Saigon.

On Dec. 14, 2010, an estimated 500 soldiers and police oversaw the demolition of a two-story building that was both Pastor

Quang's home and the headquarters of the Vietnam Mennonite Church.

Quang didn't resist the demolition but was beaten unconscious when he objected to the arrest of 20 Bible school students.

"Even though we are facing it we are also horrified by that, being beaten up and thrown like that," he said. "In Vietnam we have no right to think and speak the truth."

Quang said his legal training has helped him to be a voice for those who can't speak up for themselves. Still, he has landed in jail on seven occasions- most recently in 2005.

"Whenever I think back of times in prison I think this is the best time," Quang recalled. "I had communion with the Lord. In 2005 when I was in prison in the room, they have 100 prisoners. Fifty of them became believers."

A 2004 U.S. State Department report on human rights practices cited Vietnam's poor record on freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association.

In recent years, Vietnam has done better thanks in large part to a government initiative to register Christian churches and denominations.

"The government of Vietnam made a very concerted effort to get off the U.S. State Department list of countries of particular concern," said Todd Nettleton of Voice of the Martyrs.

"They made a public showing of, 'Look, we're making progress. Look, it's different now.' They wanted not to be on that list and it worked," he said.

Still, Nettleton and his colleague Greg Musselman are concerned. They travel the world to document cases of Christian persecution.

Musselman said religious persecution is ongoing and more

hidden.

“To the outside world you get this understanding that, ‘Hey, things aren’t so bad,’” he said. “But when you’re actually in the country, you start to talk to the believers, you realize that the persecution is still there.”

According to Pastor Quang, government registration of churches is the new frontier in the battle for freedom of religion.

“Registration is not freedom of religion,” Quang said. “If we organize a Christmas celebration, we have to ask for a permit. Registration is giving in to tighter control.”

Pastor Quang and his church have no plans to register with the government. They are now in the process of rebuilding what was destroyed.

Quang plans on continuing his fight for freedom through legal means, and most of all through prayer.

“Once we serve God, surely we must go the way of the cross,” he said. “I will not quarrel against the Lord for what has happened. Once they use violence they are defeated already. They are afraid.”