

Was Persecuted Christian's Suicide a Murder Cover-Up?

The family of Hoang Van Ngai, a Hmong Christian who died in police custody on March 17, was notified in mid-May that the Vietnamese authorities' investigation confirmed his death was caused by "suicide by self-electrocution." However, the family believes he was killed extra-judicially because of his defense of his church and determination to stand up to corrupt local officials.

Ngai was an elder of Bui Tre Church, which belongs to the legally recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South). Ngai's older brother believes Ngai made enemies among government officials because he stood up against abuses of power and refused to pay bribes. He also defended the church when the authorities tried to force them to close.

Ngai was arrested on March 15 with his elder brother, Hoang Van Pa. His wife and sister-in-law were forcibly detained the day before. The police did not present or refer to any arrest warrant or temporary detention order.

On March 17, Ngai's brother heard the sound of violent beating coming from his brother's cell. When the police took Ngai out of his cell, his brother saw that he was "completely limp as if he was dead, gone, purple marks on his throat." Photographs of Ngai's corpse show severe bruising that was not there before he was detained.

On March 18, the police headquarters announced that Ngai was dead; however, his family felt this announcement did not make clear the reason for his death. The family submitted an urgent petition to the chief of police in Dak Nong Province, contesting the suggestion made by the chairman of the People's Committee that Ngai committed suicide.

The case was widely publicized, and several international organizations and government representatives raised the case with the Vietnamese authorities. In mid-May, after two months of petitioning, the authorities finally notified the family that their investigation had confirmed the original finding of suicide by self-electrocution.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's CEO Mervyn Thomas says, "Ngai appears to have been targeted for his Christian faith and his determination to stand up to corrupt officials. The authorities' failure to address the questions raised by Ngai's death properly cast serious doubt on the government's commitment to the rights provided for in the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, to which Vietnam is a party, including provisions against the arbitrary deprivation of life (Article 6), arbitrary detention (Article 10) and the use of torture or cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment or punishment (Article 7).

"We therefore call on the government to conduct a full investigation into this case immediately, taking into account the testimonies of Ngai's brother and other prisoners, photographic evidence and the circumstances surrounding his arrest, imprisonment and death."