

Montagnard Christians at Risk after Anti-Government Violence

Vietnam's ethnic Christians are bracing for potential repercussions as investigations into recent anti-governmental violence unfold.

In the early hours of June 11, armed groups, dressed in camouflage, targeted Ea Tieu and Ea Ktur communes in Kuin District, Dak Lak Province, resulting in the tragic deaths of four policemen, two government officials and three bystanders.

The focus of recent violent episodes has turned toward the ethnic minority tribes, collectively known as Montagnards or "mountain people," as possible perpetrators of the violence. These tribes constitute 80% of Vietnam's 2 million evangelical population, raising concerns regarding any potential involvement of Montagnard Christians in this incident.

The Ministry of Public Security has identified those arrested as "young people who harbored delusion and extreme attitudes and had been incited by ringleaders via the internet."

Official media refrained from magnifying the Christian connection, despite the government's historical labeling of certain ethnic minority churches expressing political grievances as "groups posing as religions." These Christian groups face hurdles in obtaining recognition as legitimate religious entities.

A Facebook video, potentially government propaganda, implicates Montagnard Christian youth in the attacks. The video, employing aerial footage, showcases well-known church buildings affiliated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam

South (ECVN-S) and the Christian Mission Church (CMC), both legally recognized by the government. The footage portrays police raids on church offices, creating an impression of illicit activities associated with the churches, rather than the raids themselves.

While condemnation of the anti-governmental violence is warranted, it is crucial to acknowledge the deep-seated grievances faced by marginalized Montagnard Christians, particularly concerning land disputes where they consistently find themselves at a disadvantage. Recent tensions have arisen between the government and Montagnard coffee plantation owners due to the confiscation of agricultural land for infrastructure development.

Ethnic minorities in the region have long endured severe limitations on freedom of speech, assembly and religion. Although overt persecution of Christians has somewhat diminished in recent times, it still persists.

In response to the June 11 attack, the government has swiftly deployed overwhelming military and security forces, as it has done in previous similar incidents. While there have been reports of violence spreading and parts of the Central Highlands being under lockdown, these claims have not been independently confirmed.

As of June 20, Radio Free Asia reported over 70 arrests in connection with the violence. Regardless of their involvement, these individuals will undoubtedly face severe consequences.

In December 2022, the United States State Department placed Vietnam on the Special Watch List of religious freedom violators. Since then, the country has embarked on an extensive campaign to address this classification, as a significant reason for the sanction was Vietnam's strict religious freedom restrictions on independent Montagnard churches seeking more autonomy.

The pastoral challenges resulting from the Montagnard situation and the June 11 attack are immense. Christian leaders are seeking prayers for guidance in biblically shepherding their flocks, as they navigate life under an oppressive government that perpetuates injustice (Prov. 16:12). Furthermore, they desire Christians to demonstrate compassion toward victims' families and actively promote peace within society (Matt. 5:9). They seek prayer for Vietnam's rulers to recognize that pursuing justice and fairness toward marginalized minorities will alleviate discontent and contribute to the well-being of all citizens.

Although Vietnam has made improvements in recent years in terms of Christian persecution, ethnic minority Evangelicals, such as the Montagnards, remain vulnerable.

Let us unite in prayer for their protection, invoking God's strength and favor upon them (Ps. 91:11-12).

James Lasher *is Staff Writer for Charisma Media.*