

Table of Contents

- ***Unprecedented Christmas gathering held in Vietnam***
 - ***Vietnam Buddhists complain of ongoing harassment***
 - ***A testament of betrayal: Vietnam's house church Christians***
 - ***Church registration in Vietnam inches along***
 - ***Authorities in Vietnam raid, threaten house churches***
 - ***Vietnam police detain 18 Catholics after clashes***
 - ***Beatings and arrests of priests and faithful in the historic church of Tam Toa***
 - ***Police attack house church, jail leaders***
 - ***Catholic convent demolished in Vietnam***
 - ***Sun sets on Vietnamese Churches hopes to see property restored***
 - ***Sociology of religion is used to counter religion in Vietnam***
-

Unprecedented Christmas gathering held in Vietnam

With permission little and late, organizers work by faith to accommodate crowds

Compass Direct (14.12.2009) / HRWF (15.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On Friday evening (Dec. 11), history was made in communist Vietnam.

Christian sources reported that some 40,000 people gathered in a hastily constructed venue in Ho Chi Minh City to worship God, celebrate Christmas, and hear a gospel message – an event of unprecedented magnitude in Vietnam.

A popular Vietnamese Christian website and other reports indicated up to 8,000 people responded to the gospel message indicating a desire to follow Christ.

--

For the last two years, authorities surprisingly granted permission to unregistered house churches in Ho Chi Minh City to hold public Christmas rallies, and last year more than 10,000 people participated in one in Tao Dan Stadium.

This year visionary house church leaders approached the government in October and asked for a sports stadium seating 30,000; they were refused. Authorities offered a sports venue holding only 3,000, located 13 kilometers (eight miles) out of the city. This was unacceptable to the organizers. They pressed for another stadium in the city holding about 15,000, and officials gave them a verbal promise that they could have it.

The verbal promise did not translate into the written permission that is critical in the country – church leaders say such promises are empty until “we have the permission paper in our hand.” Christian leaders believed event planning had to proceed without permission and sent out invitations far and wide – only to have authorities deny the stadium they had promised.

Led by Pastor Ho Tan Khoa, chairman of a large fellowship of house church organizations, organizers were forced to look for alternatives. They found a large open field in the Go Vap district of the city. When permission was still not granted five days before the planned event, several church leaders literally camped for three days outside city hall, pressing for an answer.

Authorities, who often work to sabotage united action among Christians, tried urgently to find ways to talk the leaders out of going ahead, promising future concessions if they would cancel the event. Organizers stood firm. Ultimately they told the deputy mayor that refusal to grant permission at that point would have far-ranging, negative ramifications in Vietnam as well as internationally.

Finally, at the close of business on Dec. 9, just 48 hours before the scheduled event, officials granted permission that required clearance all the way to Hanoi. But the permission was only for 3,000 people, and many more had been invited.

Organizers had less than two days to turn a vacant field into something that would accommodate a stadium-size crowd. They had to bring in ample electricity, construct a giant stage, rent 20,000 chairs, and set up the sound and lighting. The extremely short time frame caused contractors to double the prices they would have charged with ample time.

Organizers also rented hundreds of busses to bring Christians and their non-Christian friends from provinces near the city. Thousands of students sacrificed classes to help with last-minute preparations and to join the celebration.

Just after noon on Friday (Dec. 11), word came that police had stopped busses carrying 300 Steing minority people from the west to the event scheduled for that day. Organizers, fearing all busses would be stopped, put out an emergency worldwide prayer request.

Christian sources said that authorities either did not or could not stop busses from other directions, and that by evening the venue became the biggest "bus station" in all of Vietnam. By 6 p.m. the venue was full to capacity, and at least 2,000 had to be turned away.

Christians described the event, entitled, "With Our Whole Hearts," in superlative terms. For house churches, large gatherings are both very rare and very special, and for many this was their first glimpse of the strength of Vietnam's growing Christian movement. Thousands of Christians joined a choir of more 1,000 singers in loud and joyful praise.

Sources said that the main speaker, the Rev. Duong Thanh Lam, head of the Assemblies of God house churches "preached with anointing" and people responding to his gospel invitation poured to the front of the stage "like a waterfall." With space in front of the stage insufficient, the sources said, many others in their seats also indicated their desire to receive Christ.

Organizers along with many participants were overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude as the event closed. People spontaneously hugged each other and cried, "Lord, bring revival to all of Vietnam!" Other comments included, "Beyond our fondest imagination," and, "Nothing could stop the hand of the Lord."

The event raised more than 60 million dong (US\$3,280) for a charity helping needy children. People were quite surprised to read a positive article on the event in the state-controlled press, which often vilifies Christians.

House churches in the north were hopeful that they could hold a similar event. Organizers in Hanoi have heard encouraging reports that they will get permission to use the national My Dinh sports stadium for a Christmas celebration, though they do not have it in hand. Sources said they have sent out invitations across a broad area to an event scheduled for Dec. 20.

Vietnam Buddhists complain of ongoing harassment

Ben Stocking

AP (02.12.2009) / HRWF (03.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Followers of a famed Buddhist monk say they are continuing to suffer police harassment two months after they were forcibly evicted from a monastery in southern Vietnam.

The followers of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, who has popularized Buddhism in the West and sold millions of books worldwide, say they are being persecuted because their teacher called on Vietnam's Communist government to end state control of religion and dismantle the country's religious police.

They say authorities are pressuring them to leave three temples where they have sought refuge since being ousted from the Bat Nha Monastery by an angry mob and police in late September.

On Sunday, police escorted about 20 monks and nuns from the Tu Duc Monastery in Khanh Hoa province and drove them back to their home villages, according to Sister Chan Khong, a close associate of Nhat Hanh who spoke from the Plum Village monastery in southern France, where he is based.

Police declined to comment and government officials could not be reached. Authorities have previously described the conflict as a dispute between two Buddhist factions.

They say they are simply upholding the will of Bat Nha Abbot Duc Nghi, a member of the official Buddhist Church of Vietnam who invited Nhat Hanh's followers to settle at the monastery in 2005 but rescinded his offer in 2008.

Last week, the European Union's parliament passed a resolution that criticized Vietnam's human rights record and mentioned the events at Bat Nha.

Vietnamese-born Nhat Hanh has lived in exile since being forced out of the former South Vietnam in the 1960s due to his opposition to the Vietnam War. He was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr.

He was warmly welcomed by authorities during a homecoming visit four years ago. But during a 2007 visit, he suggested to President Nguyen Minh Triet that the government give up its control of religion and consider dropping the word "socialist" from Vietnam's formal name. Since then, relations have deteriorated.

The dispute came to light in June, when an angry mob attacked Bat Nha. Nhat Hanh's followers remained at the mountain retreat until Sept. 27, when an angry mob and police forced them out.

About 350 sought refuge at the nearby Phuoc Hue temple, where the abbot, Thai Thuan, has welcomed them.

"I would be willing to let them stay in my pagoda for several years," Thuan said by telephone Tuesday.

Nhat Hanh's followers say police are keeping them under constant surveillance at Phuoc Hue and are pressuring them to leave. Authorities make regular announcements on the village public address system denouncing them as anti-government "reactionaries," according to Sister Dang Nghiem, a close associate of Nhat Hanh based in California.

Due to the ongoing pressure, Nhat Hanh's followers say, some 150 followers have left, including those who went to Tu Duc.

Another group of followers from Bat Nha has taken refuge at the Tu Hieu temple in Hue, where they say police make daily visits ordering them to leave.

Police became enraged after the abbot at Tu Hieu held an ordination ceremony on Nov. 21 for 22 of the followers, according to a statement on the helpbatnha.org Web site operated by Nhat Hanh's supporters.

The statement also said that Abbot Minh Nghia of Ho Chi Minh City was threatened by police after he offered to take in followers from Phuoc Hue.

A testament of betrayal: Vietnam's house church Christians

By Scott Johnson

Canada Free Press (22.11.2009) / HRWF (24.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The US State Department's October 2009 report on Vietnam's religious freedom sheds little light on the realities facing America's former allies, the Montagnards. In fact the report stands out as a testament of betrayal.

Puih Hbat for example is a Christian woman who was arrested by Vietnamese authorities in 2008 for the "crime" of conducting unauthorized prayer services. She is from the indigenous Montagnard ethnic group (a people also referred to as hill tribes or Degar people) who reside in Vietnam's Central Highlands and also a mother of four children.

To this day in 2009 however, her family have no idea whether she is dead or alive. In January the European Commission (with information from the US Embassy) confirmed she was imprisoned after "leading prayer services for Christians in her house". Vietnam has kept silent on her fate and unfortunately her case, like the hundreds of other Montagnard prisoners in Vietnam, brings little resonance to their former ally in Washington.

Its no secret the State Department has sidelined the Montagnard issue in lieu of trade deals and strategic relations with Hanoi. Further, the fact that Montagnard Christians refuse to join government sanctioned Churches complicates diplomacy making it convenient to ignore their former ally. Year after year however, the US Commission of International Religious Freedom (USICRF) calls for Vietnam be designated on the watch list of nations that commit religious persecution and yet the State Department resists doing so. US Ambassador to Vietnam Michael Michalak even recently claimed there is not enough evidence of religious persecution in Vietnam.

Thus, Puih Hbat has been relegated to another one of the many forgotten casualties inflicted on Vietnam's indigenous people. Her story however, dates back to when the Central Highlands of Vietnam was a strategic battleground of the Vietnam War. This region, Vietnam's western mountains is the ancestral homelands of the Montagnards and would become the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Trail extended into Laos and Cambodia forming the supply lines from the communist north to South Vietnam. It was here that America recruited the Montagnards in the war against communism.

Military documents indicate that at any one time some 30 to 40,000 Montagnards served with US forces and throughout the Vietnam War it is likely 100,000 fought as allies with America. By the end of the conflict however, one quarter of the Montagnard population

perished, some 200,000 people including half the adult males who died fighting communism.

Puih Hbat's people were decimated in the ravages of war only to face a genocidal revenge when the communists took over South Vietnam. In 1975 Hanoi unleashed their socialist inspired "ethnic cleansing" against these people and Montagnard leaders and pastors were executed while untold thousands imprisoned in re-education camps. The Montagnard population was then subjected to forced relocations and driven off their ancestral lands. This deliberate marginalization saw the Montagnards suffer like indigenous peoples the world over experienced under European colonization. In the words of Human Rights Watch, "The Montagnards have been repressed for decades."

Today, Vietnam continues a strict security presence over the Montagnard population while implementing policies to eliminate Christian house churches. Security forces strictly limit movements within Montagnard villages and monitor cell phone communications to prevent word of human rights abuses reaching the outside world. One Montagnard named Y Ngo Adrong for example was beaten to death by police in 2006 for using a cell phone. The Vietnamese military even purchased cell phone monitoring equipment from US and UK companies. Prophetically some of this equipment goes by the trade name of "the silver bullet" spy system.

Puih Hbat however, wasn't using a cell phone when she was arrested. She had only conducted prayer services in her home and days before her arrest her entire village was threatened by police to cease religious activities. A few days later in the dead of night, on April 11, 2008 eight police and soldiers stormed into her house and threw her screaming into a truck. Puih Hbat was taken to Ia Gra district prison. She may have later been transferred to T-20 prison in Pleiku but to date her family have no idea if she is alive.

In October 2009 I travelled to North Carolina and visited the exiled Montagnard community where Puih Hbat's husband, Hre Rahlan lives. He had escaped from Vietnam a few years ago and granted asylum in US as a refugee. At their weekend service some 1000 Montagnards gathered their large Church in Greensboro. Many of the congregation were recent émigrés who described how their relatives back in Vietnam still suffered. The Montagnards here however, were free from attacks by Vietnam's security police and their "youth choir" sung beautiful Christian hymns in their ancient languages.

One night in the Church I sat down with Hre Rahlan and he described how his wife was arrested for leading prayer services. His eldest son, a teenager also had been arrested by police who beat and threatened him about his mother's Christian beliefs. Today his four children live with their grandmother back in Vietnam and were only recently allowed to return to school. Hre Rahlan sat quietly describing how he missed his wife and children and I also found out an interesting fact about Puih Hbat – her father had served with the US military during the Vietnam War.

Obama administration sacrificing moral principals and throwing independant House churches under the bus

On October 26, 2009 the US State Department released its international religious freedom report and it started out half praising Hanoi, though ever so gently did remind us that some improvements in Vietnam are still needed. Given Vietnam's human rights record it appeared a whitewash of diplomatic niceties and completely skirted away from identifying key features of Vietnam's religious policy, the methods of the security police ie: torture, beatings, imprisonment and killings. The Montagnard's cries for religious freedom and indigenous lands rights seemed portrayed as almost unreasonable complications. Also missing was how authorities force Montagnards to join "government sanctioned" Churches and encourage denominational conflict. In 2007 for example a member of a government approved Church gave video tapes of "unauthorized" Christian

services to the authorities. Security police soon arrested the rival "illegal" pastor named Siu Block and tortured him. His health deteriorated and they released him from prison. Siu Block however, never recovered and died a few weeks later in October 2007.

I searched the State Department's report and could not find a word of the hundreds of Montagnard prisoners, those mentioned by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and USICRF. Nothing at all about the Montagnards murdered by Vietnamese authorities over the years.

I just couldn't help but wonder how Puih Hbat's father who had served with the United States during the Vietnam War would have reacted, knowing that now, some 40 years later the State Department didn't have the decency to mention his daughter's name in their so called religious freedom report.

It's all hypothetical of course as Puih Hbat's father died years ago and his daughter also might be dead. Yet I couldn't help but recall how her husband, Hre Rahlan looked at me with such sadness that night in the Church. Somehow in his quiet tribal manner he seemed to have prepared himself for the worst.

Church registration in Vietnam inches along

Assemblies of God obtains 'operating license,' but quest for recognition continues

Compass Direct (22.10.2009) / HRWF (27.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Assemblies of God (AoG) in Vietnam on Monday (Oct. 19) received an "operating license," which the government described as "the first step . . . before becoming officially legal."

This operating license gives permission for all of the congregations of the Vietnam AoG to "carry on religious activity" anywhere in the country for the next year. During this time the church body must prepare a doctrinal statement, a constitution and bylaws and a four-year working plan to be approved by the government before being allowed to hold an organizing assembly. These steps, AoG leaders hope, would lead to legal recognition.

The operating license is the first one granted since five were granted two years ago. The last of those five churches, the Christian Fellowship Church, was finally allowed to hold its organizing assembly in late September. According to an internal 2008 government Protestant Training Manual obtained by church leaders, this assembly was delayed because authorities observed large discrepancies between the number of followers the group claimed and the actual number, as well as other "instability."

Vietnam News Service reported on Sept. 29 that the Christian Fellowship Church has "30,000 believers nationwide."

Should the AoG achieve legal recognition, it would be the ninth among some 70 Protestant groups in Vietnam and the seventh since new religion legislation touted to expedite registration was introduced in 2004.

The AoG quest was typically long, and it is not yet over. Though started in the early 1970s before the communist era, the denomination was deemed dormant by authorities after the communist takeover and restarted in 1989. Strangely, the Vietnamese religion law requires a church organization to have 20 years of stable organization before it can even be considered for legal recognition.

Though the AoG had been trying for years to register, only this year did it fulfill the 20-year requirement in the eyes of the government. Sources said AoG's resistance to strong pressure by the government to eliminate a middle or district level of administration may also have contributed to the delay.

Ironically, the official government news report credits the Vietnam AoG with 40,000 followers, while denominational General Superintendent Samuel Lam told Compass the number is 25,000. He also said he hoped the advantages of registration would outweigh the disadvantages.

With no more operating licenses being granted, the future of registration is in a kind of limbo. Sources said a lower level of registration in which local authorities are supposed to offer permission for local congregations to carry on religious activities while the more complicated higher levels are worked out has largely failed. Only about 10 percent of the many hundreds of applications have received a favorable reply, they said, leaving most house churches vulnerable to arbitrary harassment or worse.

Leaders of all Protestant groups say that they continue to experience government resistance, as well as social pressure, whenever they preach Christ in new areas. They added that evidence is strong that the government's aim is to contain Protestant growth.

Hmong Christians who fled the Northwest Mountainous Region for the Central Highlands a decade ago, developing very poor land in places such as Dak Nong, reported to Compass that they were singled out for land confiscation just when their fields became productive. They said ethnic Vietnamese made these land grabs with the complicity of the authorities, sometimes multiple times.

At the same time, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on Oct. 19 that Vietnam has experienced a "sharp backsliding on religious freedom." Among other incidents, HRW cited the late September crackdown on followers of Buddhist peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. Some 150 monks were forcibly evicted from his sect's Bat Nha Monastery in Lam Dong province on Sept. 27, and 200 nuns fled in fear the next day. As in recent land disputes with Roman Catholics involving thousands of demonstrators, authorities hired local and imported thugs to do the deed to present the image that ordinary local people were upset with the religion.

After a visit to Vietnam in May, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that the United States reinstate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), the blacklist of religious liberty offenders. Vietnam had been on the list from 2004 until 2006.

The USCIRF, which experienced less government cooperation than on some previous visits, observed that "Vietnam's overall human rights record remains poor, and has deteriorated since Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization in January 2007."

Some key Protestant leaders describe themselves as weary and frustrated at what they termed the government's lack of sincerity, extreme tardiness and outright duplicity regarding religious freedom. They too said they believe that the lifting of Vietnam's CPC status was premature and resulted in the loss of a major incentive for Vietnam to improve religious freedom.

Authorities in Vietnam raid, threaten house churches

Christians note increase in government harassment – some of it violent

Compass Direct (06.08.2009) / HRWF (07.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Local authorities in Vietnam have balked at registering house churches, contributing to a recent uptick in sometimes violent harassment of congregations.

Four police officers and two government officials broke up the Sunday morning worship service of a house church in Tran Phu Commune in Hanoi on July 26, announcing that it was illegal to worship and teach religion. The police chief of Tran Phu Commune in greater Hanoi, Dang Dinh Toi, had ordered the raid.

When Christians under the leadership of Pastor Dang Thi Dinh refused to sign a document admitting they were meeting illegally, an angry police officer shouted, "If I find you meeting here next Sunday, I will kill you all like I'd kill a dog!"

Officials had previously refused to grant the church's application for registration. Pastor Dinh and the national leader of the Ecclesia Revival denomination, Pastor Vo Xuan Loan, appealed to commune authorities the following day - again trying to register the church according to the Prime Minister's 2005 Special Directive Concerning Protestants.

The commune head angrily proclaimed, "There are absolutely no Christians in this commune!" and then shooed them away, church leaders reported.

In nearby Hung Yen province, an Agape Baptist house church led by Pastor Duong Van Tuan was raided several times in June (see www.compassdirect.org, "Police Attack House Churches, Jail Leaders," June 18). Since then Compass learned from Pastor Tuan that his wife Nguyen Thi Vuong was badly abused on June 21. A group of policemen roughed her up, and then two of them seized her by her arms and repeatedly banged her head into a wall, he said.

When she fainted, Pastor Tuan said, they dragged her out and dumped her in a nearby field. Fellow Christians took her to medical care. The church situation remains unresolved.

Also in the north, in Viet Thuan Commune of Thai Binh Province, commune police broke up a house church meeting of the Vietnam Good News Mission Church on July 25, seizing seven hymnals and summoning Pastor Bui Xuan Tuyen to the police station for interrogation. In a letter to his superiors, Pastor Tuyen complained of police cursing and scolding him.

They confiscated his motorbike and sent it to a distant district office. In spite of such pressure, he refused to write a confession for what they termed his "crimes." He was held until 10 p.m. before being released to collect his motorbike.

Southern Troubles

The situation is not better in the south. On Friday (July 31) Vietnam Good News Mission Church Pastor Mai Hong Sanh was subjected to a public denunciation and trial reminiscent of 1950s-style communism in the town of Ea Hleo, in Dak Lak Province.

He was sentenced to three months of "local re-education" for expanding his house without permission and giving religious training without permission - both practically impossible for Christians to obtain - and "causing social division." This was the government's answer to his church's aspirations and attempts to provide training for ethnic minority church workers at Pastor Sanh's home.

As a result, he can go nowhere without prior permission and must submit to political indoctrination courses at the whim of local officials. About 120 people, mostly town officials and police, attended his "trial" - Pastor Sanh was not allowed to defend himself,

and authorities marshaled people they said were members of another church to accuse him, Christian sources said.

On Sunday (Aug. 2), some 15 policemen barged into a house church worship service in Xuan Thoi Thuong Commune, Hoc Mon district, Ho Chi Minh City. Brandishing batons and electric prods, police demanded that people leave immediately, according to local sources. Two new believers fled, they said, but most of the small congregation remained.

In a show of force, police officers also lined up outside the house and announced to curious neighbors who had gathered, "If anyone of you come to Chinh's house and believe in his God, you will be in deep trouble," according to the sources. Nguyen Van Chinh, leader of this independent house church, had been receiving such visits and threats by security forces since January.

Following the advice of local authorities, he had tried to register his house church as provided by Vietnamese law, but to no avail. At midnight on July 24, five police officers beat on his door demanding to be let in "to check IDs."

Though he had submitted a registration application months before, they told him that "future zoning would not allow religious activities" and that he must permanently cease church meetings, sources said. When his congregation continued meeting, he was issued an "administrative fine," which he appealed. His house church continued worshipping, leading to Sunday's raid.

Church leaders said such incidents are representative of many others not reported for security reasons. Asked about the reasons for this uptick in harassment, church leaders strongly agreed that it is a firm though unwritten government policy to try to stop any expansion of Christianity. They said the harassment was so widespread that it must have approval from the top level of the central government.

All of the churches in this report tried to register according to supposedly clear government guidelines but have been denied without a legitimate reason.

Christian leaders also observed that Vietnam, having achieved its goal of getting off the U.S. religious liberty black list and won accession to the World Trade Organization, no longer worries much about international opinion. Others added that authorities, who retain a special suspicion of Christianity, are trying to suppress any expressions of the widely growing discontent with Vietnam's government and the Communist Party.

At the same time, Catholics have been involved in larger clashes with authorities and with gangs of thugs widely believed to be hired and stirred up by the government. The government-backed gangs have beaten Catholic families. A fierce clash between Catholics and the government flared up in Dong Hoi City, in central Quang Binh province, on July 22. Police and hoodlums interfered with some 200 faithful trying to rebuild part of the bombed out Tam Toa Cathedral.

Reminding Catholics of the heavy-handed ending to church property claims in Hanoi last year, this incident quickly got the support of Catholics around the country. Some estimated that up to 500,000 Catholics nationwide participated in prayer vigils the following Sunday.

According to a long-time Compass source on Vietnam, the legally registered Protestant bodies are no more optimistic than their Catholic counterparts. Their leaders complain of unending bureaucratic blockages, harassment and interference.

"Overall, there is more pessimism today than four or five years ago, when people had hopes that new religion regulations might lead to steady improvement," the source said.

"But it was not to be. Hence trust in government promises to improve religious liberty is at a very low ebb."

Vietnam police detain 18 Catholics after clashes

AP (22.07.2009) / HRWF (23.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Clashes broke out after Catholics erected a makeshift place of worship in central Vietnam on a site where American bombs destroyed a church during the Vietnam War. Communist authorities detained 18 people.

The confrontation started Monday when about 150 Catholics built the structure intended for religious services on the site of the Tam Toa church, which was destroyed by U.S. planes in 1968, Father Pham Dinh Phung said Wednesday by telephone from Quang Binh province.

"The police beat the Catholics, and some of them were bleeding," Phung said, adding that officers dismantled the makeshift church and took away the cross.

Police released two 15-year-old girls but the 18 others remained jailed, he said. "We strongly protest the beating and arrests of the Catholics and demand their immediate release," Phung said.

Tran Cong Thuat, deputy governor of Quang Binh, denied police beat anyone. "There were clashes between the Catholics and the local residents," he told The Associated Press by phone. "Police were there just to keep order."

People on both sides suffered minor injuries including several police officers, Thuat said.

The provincial government turned the Tam Toa church site into a Vietnam War memorial in 1991, Thuat said.

Catholics have since been forced to hold religious services at a house nearby but have pushed for a new church, Phung said.

"Church leaders met with provincial government officials about a year ago and they promised to give us land, but so far they haven't kept their words," he said.

Thuat said the local government has recommended five places for the site of the new church, but Catholic leaders have not agreed on any.

The communist government confiscated much of the Church's property after taking power from the French in 1954 in what was then North Vietnam.

Monday's dispute was the latest between Vietnamese authorities and the Catholic Church since disagreements of over land in the capital Hanoi last year. Several Catholics were arrested after knocking down a section of a wall surrounding one piece of property and setting up an altar and a statue of Virgin Mary.

Vietnam has more than 6 million Catholics, the second-largest number in Southeast Asia after the Philippines.

The communist country has often come under international criticism for its record on religious freedom and human rights. Hanoi does not have diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

Quang Binh province is about 315 miles (500 kilometers) south of Hanoi.

Beatings and arrests of priests and faithful in the historic church of Tam Toa

By J.B. An Dang

AsiaNews (21.07.2009) / HRWF (22.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - All that remains of the historic church of Tam Toa, built at the end of 1800 and hit by American bombing in 1968, has become grounds for confrontation between Catholics and the government. Yesterday, police charged and beat hundreds of Catholics from the Diocese of Vinh (334 km south of Hanoi), who had erected a cross and an altar on the grounds of the church.

"The Police - tells father Thanh Hong, pastor of the parish - launched tear gas bombs on people, before kicking and beating them with sticks and stun guns. Many priests and faithful were injured". "Some - he adds - were forced to lie on the ground, where they were again beaten by groups of young thugs hired by the police. Dozens more were loaded onto police vans and we still do not know where they have been brought".

For Catholics in Vietnam the Church of Tam Toa has a special value of its own. Evidence of the church stretches back to 1631 and in the seventeenth century it was the largest in the region, then known as Sao Bun, with 1,200 faithful. The current building, built in Portuguese style, with a typical large bell tower, was opened in 1887 and was considered one of the most beautiful churches in the country. During the war it was hit by American bombing, but the facade and the bell tower are still standing. Once the bombings were over, the parishioners were so impoverished that they could not restore their church. However, religious ceremonies were regularly held on its land. Until 1996, when the People's Committee of Quang Binh province confiscated it, ruling that it would become "a memorial site" and that it was to be "preserved and protected for future generations, in memory of the war crimes of the Americans".

The Archdiocese of Hue protested against the decision, but in vain. In May 2006 the parish was transferred to the diocese of Vinh, where Bishop Paul Maria Cao Dinh Thuyen, repeatedly asked in vain the restitution of the church. On 2 February this year, despite the threats of the authorities, the bishop and 14 priests went to Tam Toa and celebrated Mass there, attended by thousands of Catholics. Tensions were rekindled when rumours surfaced of a project that aims to transform the church into a tourist resort. Tam Toa today is "the parish" for a thousand faithful, many of whom desire to breathe new life into it for their spiritual needs and to involve more people in religious activities.

Police attack house church, jail leaders

Compass Direct (18.06.2009) / HRWF (24.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Police invaded the Sunday service of the Agape Baptist congregation in Vietnam's Hung Yen Province on June 7 and beat worshippers, including women, and arrested a pastor and an elder.

Christian sources said police put the two church leaders into separate cells, and each man was beaten by a gang of five policemen. Pastor Duong Van Tuan of the house church in Hamlet 3, Ong Dinh Commune, Khoai Chau district said that officers beat them in a way that did not leave marks: hard blows to the stomach.

The beatings came in retaliation for Pastor Tuan refusing to leave the area as police had ordered, Christian sources said. He and the church elder were released later that evening.

The congregation in Hung Yen, a small but populous province that straddles the Red River 50 kilometers (31 miles) south of Hanoi, has endured harassment and attacks by police and other officials since April. Police officers disrupted worship services on April 19, bloodying Pastor Tuan's mouth with punches, and also on May 24 and 31.

In the May 31 incident, he was attacked as he preached. The deputy commune police chief, identified only by his surname of Them, grabbed him by the neck while another officer tore the Bible from his hand, Christian sources said. His arms were twisted behind his back and "he was marched off like a criminal gang member," one said.

Authorities took Pastor Tuan to the office of the commune people's committee, clubbing him several times en route. Immediately after arriving at the office, police tried to force him to sign a document saying he had resisted their investigation, though he had yet to be questioned, and said that he was under administrative arrest. Christian sources said he was also ordered to sign a document accepting the seizure of his Bible, which they had taken from him two hours prior.

Officers ended by issuing him an order "to leave the commune immediately by the most direct route."

A woman from his congregation who was unable to obtain cooperation from authorities at lower levels, Le thi Nhung, prepared and sent a detailed, three-page petition to local, provincial and national authorities on June 1, a week before officers last stormed their worship service.

In the petition, Nhung explained that one of the first things Pastor Tuan did on his arrival in March was to explain to church elders how to register their congregation's activities according to the Prime Minister's Special Directive on Protestantism of 2005. This directive permits and urges local authorities to register house churches to carry on religious activities. Pastor Tuan also went to the local Fatherland Front chair, a woman identified only as Hao, explained the church's aspirations and asked her to help them meet requirements.

The church elders submitted an application to register locally, in accordance with the directive. Authorities, however, did not respond within the 30-day period prescribed by the directive. On the 31st day, they sent a document denying registration.

Bogus Denial

Officials gave two reasons for denying registration, Christian sources said: that the congregation needed permission from higher authorities, including the central Bureau of Religious Affairs; and that in any event the Prime Minister's directive applied only to churches on mountains and not to churches on plains.

Both reasons, local Christians said, are contrary to the directive.

The church's petition to the government clearly spelled out two articles of the constitution (71 and 73) and four articles of Vietnam's criminal code (87, 124, 129 and 33) that police and local authorities violated in attacking their church and pastor.

The petition also reflects awareness of related international affairs. It says that on national news in Vietnam on May 27, church members heard the appeal of Ministry of

Foreign Affairs officials to the U.S. Congress to vote down a recommendation by some U.S. officials to return Vietnam to the U.S. list of worst religious liberty offenders as a "Country of Particular Concern."

"Think of how much hard work by the government, the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has just been thrown into the ocean by the officials of Ong Dinh Commune," the petition states.

It concludes with a respectful request to all appropriate government authorities to investigate and "to help us law-abiding, tax-paying citizens of Khoai Chau District who practice pure and orthodox religion to peacefully practice our faith as a right protected by the State."

In separate letters to supporting friends abroad, the leaders of the Agape Baptist House Church group, with 34 congregations throughout Vietnam, say that according to their long experience, "persecution is often a sign that the Lord is at work." They add that they are not discouraged and see a growing maturity among Christians who suffer and overcome such gratuitous abuse. But they also say they feel much pain in seeing their Christian family disrespected, mistreated and abused.

The experience of this congregation is not uncommon, Christian sources said. Other unregistered house church groups report their requests for registering local congregations are being either ignored or denied.

Compass sources said they rarely see such abuse as well-documented as in this case. Said one advocate, "It would be very easy for authorities to follow this up and do the right thing, but few expect they will. It illustrates once more the famous Vietnamese maxim, 'The law of the Emperor yields to the custom of the village.'"

Catholic convent demolished in Vietnam

By J.B. An Dang

AsiaNews (08.06.2009) / HRWF (09.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -The monastery of the Congregation of the Brothers of The Holy Family of Banam (Frères de la Sainte Famille de Banam) has been demolished by government order, a spokesman for the diocese of Long Xuyen, capital of An Giang province, reported. As a result of the sudden decision by local authorities the monastery shares the same fate of monastery of the Sisters of St Paul of Chartres in Vinh Long, Mekong Delta province.

Built in 1971 the two-storey building was still in so good condition and had been used to house members of the Order of the Holy Family.

As a result of the demolition the altar and religious statues were all discarded in a rubbish dump.

The sudden decision to tear down the monastery took Catholic officials by surprise. They are still unaware of the authorities' motives for the destruction and of their intention for the future use of the land. However, in the recent past many Church properties have been turned into hotels and tourist resorts.

At the same time Vietnamese Catholics are concerned for the recent government crackdown. For months now the Communist state has been involved in an anti-Catholic campaign, seizing its properties, dragging the reputation of priests and men religious

through the mud, for the only reason of trying to protect the environment. For all intents and purposes the government is trying to limit the right to worship.

On 21 May, Nguyen Thanh Xuan, the government's deputy chief of religious affairs, made it clear that the state "has no intention of returning any property or goods to the Catholic Church or any other religious organisation."

The demolition of the convent is thus another sign that religious freedom is under threat in Vietnam.

The Congregation of the Brothers of Banam was established in 1931 by Bishop Valentin Herrgott, then Vicar Apostolic of Phnom-Penh, Cambodia.

In 1970, after a coup against Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk, the Congregation of the Brothers of Banam moved to the diocese of Long Xuyen, Vietnam, for security reasons.

In 1984 all the members of the order were arrested charged with "counter-revolutionary activities" and their convent was shut down.

On several occasions churchmen have been imprisoned without trial. Several times the congregation has called justice, protesting against the detention of men religious, demanding the return of seized property, but to no avail.

Sun sets on Vietnamese Churches hopes to see property restored

By J.B. An Dang

AsiaNews (26.05.2009) / HRWF (27.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Vietnamese government has confirmed that it will return "nothing" of the 2,250 properties taken from the Church which was a "powerful landlord" of properties now destined for the "for the common benefit" of population. In reality, party officials seized Churches, orphanages, hospitals, schools and other facilities destined for social needs in order to put them to private use or exploit them economically to further Communist Party finances.

It is not a new issue: when the communists seized power in the north (1954) and later in the south (1975) they took possession of all of the Churches properties and lands. It was a brutally conducted takeover: an official Hanoi document reports 172,008 executions and in the same document, (The history of Vietnam economics from 1945 to 2000, Vol. 2, published in 2004 by the Vietnam Bureau of Economic Affairs), the Vietnam government admits that among those who were killed, 123,226 were actually victims of injustice. There were threats, imprisonment and much more. It was then established that all lands belonged to the State, as always for the common benefit of the population, who would then concede their use and management to organisations and private individuals.

In reality, over the past ten years Hanoi has enacted a political tug of war regarding the issue of Church properties. Few concessions, numerous rejections. Despite this the Church continues in its endeavour to see its property returned, through dialogue with the authorities, which has never completely stopped despite the January 6th note issued by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung (N. 1940/CT-TTg) regarding "lands and properties in relation to religions". The note affirmed that no properties would ever be returned, but it imposed on those who managed them an obscure clause that forbids their being used in a way that "injures the sentiments of believers".

Now, in an interview with Radio Free Asia Nguyen Thanh Xuan, vice chief of Commission for Religious and Ethnic Affairs has stated that his government "has no intention to return any properties to the Catholic Church or any other groups of religion" citing the principle of national ownership of land.

At the same time, Xuan has described the Church as "Địa Chủ Nhà Chung" which literally "grand landlord" who has acquired much of the land to get rich and live luxuriously on the "blood, sweat and tears" of poor tenants. "It's a distortion of history" responds Fr. Joseph Nguyen from Hanoi. "Most of properties seized by the government were buildings the Church used for worship, education, or various charitable activities including hospitals to provide health care for the poor" he underlines. "The Church in Vietnam has never used its land as a financial resource. In fact, the Church in Vietnam has not profited from renting or selling of any piece of properties in dispute". "The term 'Địa Chủ Nhà Chung' is therefore an insult - a crass, immoral insult - to the Church and Vietnamese Catholics," he adds. Labeling Catholic leaders as landlords echoes a tactic frequently used by the Vietnam government in the 1950s to seize Church properties, terrorize bishops, priests, religious and faithful, and ultimately alienate them from the public.

"Many buildings that once belonged to the Church have been administered by the State on the grounds that they were needed for social purposes. Even when their purposes are no longer met, the buildings are seldom returned to their owners", underlines Fr. Joseph Nguyen. "Very often, Church properties have been used either to award government officials or to produce financial support for the Party".

Sr. Marie Nguyen, of Ho Chi Minh City emphasises "The Church has demanded the return of its properties so that they can be used to benefit society, not the Party".

Sociology of religion is used to counter religion in Vietnam

by Ngoc Dung

AsiaNews (27.01.2009) / HRWF (28.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Whether intentionally or not, the lack of understanding of religion and the way sociology of religion is taught tend to go against Catholicism and other faiths. But for Vietnam's Communist government, faith and religion of a segment of the population represent spiritual needs that will continue to exist during the construction of socialism. People are free to believe or not believe in any faith of their choosing and engage in normal religious activities within the law and this in accordance with coherent policies that respect and guarantee religious freedom. However, scholars and experts, who are public employees, tend to follow the government line in teaching courses on the sociology of religion and atheistic theories which are biased against Catholicism and other religions.

"I don't understand my professor when he tells me: 'After the lesson I cannot summarise for you; you must do it on your own'," said Nguyen, a sociology student at Ho Chi Minh City's Open University. "In my opinion sociology of religion is taught by professors who do not understand enough about Catholicism, or Buddhism or other religions. They have never believed in God; they only believe in materialism, the pillar of our society, and in money."

Hoa, who studies sociology at Da Lat University, spoke to AsiaNews about the matter. "I am in my first year of specialisation in sociology," she said. "In studying the subject of my specialisation I am getting the impression that I am studying politics and that my

professor is teaching me the government's point of view. Those who teach religious sociology don't understand Catholicism. They say religion is a drug, a 'tam linh', that is a spirit because 'God's existence cannot be proven scientifically'. Teachers like these are harming our generation of young people, discriminating against Catholic and non Catholic students and other religions."

Vietnam's population today stands at about 84 million, 80 per cent of whom are religious. Catholics represent 7 per cent of the total. Atheists are about 1 per cent of the population but they control religion.

Moreover, many teachers, experts, social workers and medical doctors are corrupted by local authorities with offers of positions and money.

Sister Teresa, a sociology student at Hanoi's National University, told AsiaNews, that the "goal of religious sociology ought to be to teach basic concepts by looking at certain theories, research methods, etc. Instead professors ask students to learn the fundamental concepts of Marxism as tools to understand religious phenomena in Vietnam. My professor is a 'national father,' that is a veteran, who works for the state-run university. How can I believe him when he is always criticising the Church and defending an atheist and Communist point of view!"

"I work with the poor in some parishes in the Saigon diocese," said Father P., a social worker involved in some local development projects. "Other work groups from the Catholic Unity Committee of Viet Nam are involved in the same thing in Ho Chi Minh City. Some professors and experts are backed or work for local authorities. They have the 'O Du' from 'local mass organisations' or 'foreign social organisations' and entertain good relations with government institutions like the 'Hoi Quan Den Voi Nhap', a group involved in social activities, teaching according to its own methods. They approach people and teach social work on the basis of sociological principles that conform to the authorities' point of view. They have not attended any church, nor gone to confession or received the Body of Christ for 31 years. How can we believe them when they teach the lies of local authorities! I hope we can pray together to find faith in God, showing Catholics' love for all people and for other religions, helping people and local churches face society's difficulties.

One sociology student at the Open University in Ho Chi Minh City said that "when we had to choose our field of study, the head of the Faculty of Sociology assured us that 'after studying here and getting your degree, you can work for government agencies, study groups, social research centres, government religious research centres as top officials in agencies, mass organisations, people's organisations, the Communist youth organisations, the women's union, community development project and businesses.' However, many of my friends and former university students tell me that a sociology degree is a dead end with few job prospects in these fields. The result is that we must be retrained in other faculties and lose a lot of time in other studies."

"I am studying sociology," said Hai, who goes to the National University in Ho Chi Minh City. "The central point of my specialisation is the philosophy of Marx and Lenin and the ideas of Ho Chi Minh. The courses in the sociology of religion focus on how religion is seen by the government and are not based on social science. Many professors do not know enough or do not understand well Catholicism and other religions."

Professors and experts, who work for the government, teach the sociology of religion and atheistic theories according to the government line and end up opposing Catholicism and other religions.
