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Lao Christians expelled from village suffer critical illnesses

Compass Direct (14.05.2010) / HRWF (18.05.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In spite of assurances of religious rights by officials in March, Lao Christians expelled from a village in Saravan Province in January are suffering from a prolonged lack of adequate food and clean water.

The lack of basic resources has led to diarrhea, dehydration, eye and skin infections, fainting and general weakness for the Christians expelled from Katin village, and one person has died, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported.

A Christian who went by the single name of Ampheng died suddenly in April while praying for one of two other Christians who were hospitalized with illnesses caused by their living conditions, an HRWLRF spokesman told Compass. The exact cause and date of Ampheng's death were not immediately known.

Expelled from their village at gunpoint on Jan. 18 for failing to renounce their faith, the 48 Christians were forced to build temporary shelters at the edge of the jungle, about six kilometers (nearly four miles) away from the village.

They have since survived on food found in the jungle and water from a hand-dug well that is unfit for cooking or drinking, sources told HRWLRF.

District officials in early May gave the Christians permission to return to Katin village and take rice from their family rice barns to prevent starvation, said another source on condition of anonymity.

In addition, some of the Christians have returned to tend their family rice fields, fearing that if the fields are completely abandoned they may lose the right to cultivate them next year. Water buffaloes essential for farm work, however, were confiscated in January along with the Christians' homes and registration papers, according to HRWLRF.

When the Christians interred Ampheng at the local burial ground, district officials fined them for failing to produce the required proof of house registration, according to HRWLRF.

Katin's village chief recently warned other residents that their personal possessions would be confiscated if they had any contact with the expelled Christians. If any family continued to maintain contact despite repeated warnings, their own homes would be torn down, the chief reportedly said.

Official reactions to the plight of the Christians have been mixed. In March, a delegation of provincial and district officials led by Gov. Khamboon Duangpanya visited the Christians at their jungle site and assured them of their legal right to embrace the faith of their choice and to live anywhere in the district.

Just days earlier, however, the district head, identified only as Bounma, summoned seven of the Christians to his office and said that he would not tolerate the existence of Christianity in areas under his control. (See "Lao Officials Visit Expelled Christians, Give Assurances," March 19.)

High level officials failed to intervene last July when villagers seized a Christian identified only as Pew and poured rice wine down his throat, killing him by asphyxiation. Village officials later fined Pew's family for erecting a cross on his grave, and then detained 80 Christians in a school compound, denying them food and pressuring them to renounce their faith.

The heads of 13 families then signed documents renouncing Christianity in order to protect their children, but most resumed attendance at worship meetings within a few months.

Provincial officials did call a meeting in September 2008 asking Katin authorities to respect Lao religious laws and allow the Christians freedom to worship, but their request was ignored.

A communist country, Laos is 1.5 percent Christian and 67 percent Buddhist, with the remainder unspecified. Article 6 and Article 30 of the Lao Constitution guarantees the right of Christians and other religious minorities to practice the religion of their choice without discrimination or penalty.

Lao officials force Christians from worship at gunpoint

Church members marched to open field, deprived of homes

By Edward Ross

Compass Direct (08.02.2010) / HRWF (10.02.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - About 100 local officials, police and villagers put guns to the heads of Christians during their Sunday morning service in a village in Laos last month, forcing them from their worship and homes, according to an advocacy organization.

Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported that in Katin village of Ta-Oyl district, Saravan Province, Lao authorities including the village chief, a religious affairs' official, three district police and a 15-man volunteer unit joined 15 village police officers to force all 48 Christian adults and children of the church to an open field.

Afterward, the officials confiscated all personal belongings from 11 homes of Christians and destroyed six of the 11 homes. They also confiscated a pig - equal to six weeks' salary to the villagers - that belonged to one of the members of the congregation, according to HRWLRF.

Unable to cajole the Christians into renouncing Christ with the illegal use of arms, the officials forced them to walk six kilometers (nearly four miles) and then left them on the side of a road.

"While being forced with guns to their heads, the believers took only the personal belongings they could grab," according to an HRWLRF statement.

Since then, officials have posted local police at the entrance of Katin village in order to keep the Christians from returning. The men, women and children of the church have

been sleeping on the ground in the woods with hardly enough food supplies, equipment, or tools to survive, according to HRWLRF.

"They are without light, food and clean water, except for a small stream nearby," the organization reported.

Laos is a Communist country that is 1.5 percent Christian and 67 percent Buddhist, with the remainder unspecified. Article 6 and Article 30 of the Lao Constitution guarantee the right of Christians and other religious minorities to practice the religion of their choice without discrimination or penalty.

Around Jan. 18, a Saravan provincial religious affairs official identified only by his surname, Khampuey, and a Ta-Oyl district official identified only by the surname of Bounma tried to persuade the believers to renounce their Christian faith, according to the organization

Why do you believe in it [the Bible]?" they asked the Christians. "It's just a book."

When the Christians responded that the Bible was no mere book but a gift from God, the officials pointed out that other poor villagers had received government assistance because they had not converted to Christianity. They asked the church if, being Christians, they were receiving such government aid.

HRWLRF reported that the Christians responded that regardless of what help they did or didn't receive, they had received new life from God.

"Before, we were under the power of the spirits and had to sacrifice to them," said one Christian. "Now, having believed in God, we no longer have to do any sacrifice."

The officials further harangued them, saying, "See what happens to you because of your belief? You are now left in the middle of nowhere without any home, food, or help. You should deny your Christian belief and then you will be allowed back in your village." The officials added, according to HRWLRF, that all 56 villages in Ta-Oyl district did not want them to continue in their Christian faith.

"These villages have said that they can accept lepers and demon-possessed persons living among them, but they cannot allow believers residing among them," one official reportedly told the Christians. "If they do not want you, neither do we."

Unable to persuade the believers to renounce Christ, the two officials prohibited them from returning to their home village to get their personal belongings, including tools and items needed to make a living and protect themselves.

Although Laos ratified the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights in 2009, thus asserting that it fully respects human rights and religious freedom, its mistreatment of Lao Christians in Katin village has continued beyond the confiscation and slaughter of pigs belonging to each of the nine Christian families on July 5, 2009 and the withdrawal of protection for Christian villagers on July 11, HRWLRF reported.

The Katin village leader has declared that spirit worship is the only acceptable form of worship in the community, HRWLRF reported. In the July 5 slaughter of one pig each from nine Christian families, officials said it was punishment for ignoring an order to abandon Christianity.

Local officials have a longer history of trying to eradicate Christianity in Katin village. On July 21, 2008, officials detained 80 Christians in the village after residents seized a

Christian identified only as Pew and poured rice wine down his throat, killing him by asphyxiation.

When family members buried Pew and placed a wooden cross on his grave, officials accused them of "practicing the rituals of the enemy of the state" and seized a buffalo and pig from them as a fine.

On July 25, 2008, officials rounded up 17 of the 20 Christian families then living in the village – a total of 80 men, women and children – and detained them in a school compound, denying them food in an effort to force the adults to sign documents renouncing their faith. The other three Christian families in the village at that time had already signed the documents under duress.

As their children grew weaker, 10 families signed the documents and were permitted to return home. The remaining seven families were evicted from the village and settled in an open field nearby, surviving on whatever food sources they could find.

Suffering from the loss of their property and livelihoods, however, the seven families eventually recanted their faith and moved back into the village. But over time, some of the Christians began gathering again for prayer and worship.

On Sept. 8, 2008, provincial and district authorities called a meeting in Katin village and asked local officials and residents to respect the religious laws of the nation. Four days later, however, village officials seized a buffalo worth approximately US\$350 from a Christian resident identified only as Bouchu, telling him the animal would be returned only if he renounced his faith. When he refused, they slaughtered the animal in the village square and distributed the meat to non-Christian residents.

"These tactics of starvation and destruction of personal properties as well as the use of force employed by the Lao officials in order to put pressure on the Katin believers to renounce their religious convictions should be condemned," according to HRWLRF.

In spite of the hostilities, more households accepted Christ in Katin village last year, resulting in to the current total of 11 Christian households.
