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Vietnam grants last-minute permit for Christmas event

Officials present several obstacles to large-scale worship service

Compass Direct (29.12.2010) / HRWF (30.12.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Granted permission only five hours before a scheduled Christmas event, house church leaders turned an empty field into a rudimentary stadium and welcomed some 20,000 people for a time of worship and evangelism on Sunday (Dec. 26) in Vietnam's largest city.

The last-minute permission for the event in Ho Chi Minh City reflected the byzantine manner in which authorities have applied Vietnam's religions laws. The central government's Bureau of Religious Affairs (BRA) in Hanoi, the body charged with managing religion in communist Vietnam, gave permission for the event to the newly registered Vietnam Assemblies of God (AOG) organization in early December. The Vietnam AOG represents a large grouping of mostly unregistered house churches in the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF).

Organizers were grateful for the early permission this year – last year they received only 42 hours notice for an event that 40,000 people attended – but when the AOG superintendent, Pastor Duong Thanh Lam, and other VEF leaders began working out particulars with the Ho Chi Minh City BRA, they met with considerable resistance. After the Ho Chi Minh City BRA finally consented, church leaders said, the organizers found that landlords with potential venues, clearly under pressure, refused to rent them space.

The stand-off lasted until Christmas Day. Meantime, based on the permission from Hanoi, organizers sent invitations to many thousands of Christians in the city and surrounding provinces, and Christians were preparing to come with friends and neighbors to the event, sources said. Some 300 buses, each carrying 60 to 70 passengers, were to bring people from the provinces, they said.

By 11 a.m. on Christmas Day, in spite of official promises, the required permission papers had not yet been granted, church leaders said. Organizers debated whether to push ahead or call off the event – wondering whether communicating word of a cancellation was even possible at that point. Finally at 5 p.m., in an emergency meeting with the city's ruling People's Committee, they got a verbal go-ahead and a promise of a written permit.

They said this meant they had only 24 hours to build a perimeter around the field, bring in electricity and water, prepare sanitary facilities, set up chairs, erect a stage, and install the sound and lighting systems.

But the next morning – the Sunday of the planned event – authorities informed organizers that the permission was not for their program but only to provide a place where the buses and people could come so organizers could explain, apologize and send

them home, sources said. Organizers said it was another in a series of deeply discouraging betrayals, but that many Christians in Vietnam and worldwide were praying fervently.

Just before noon, a church leader went to the BRA office in a last-ditch attempt to get written permission. He urged officials to think through the possible consequences of many thousands of people arriving in the city for a much anticipated event and finding nothing. Finally at 1 p.m., just five hours before the event was scheduled to start, the BRA issued written permission for a gathering of 5,000 people.

Permission at last in hand, organizers called and text-messaged the many people standing by to help set up to come to the venue in district 12. Sources said they came quickly, like a small army, encountering huge cement culverts and pilings on roads as they approached the venue. These had to be manually removed to allow buses and trucks to enter.

Too late now to set up properly, they said, they did only what was absolutely necessary. They brought in 14,000 chairs on flatbed trucks, and one of the trucks served as the stage. As a backdrop they had time only to put up a large red cross with a white border that, when lit, sources said, stood starkly and powerfully against the night sky.

Crews and volunteers worked feverishly erecting towers and installing sound and lighting systems. Christmas worshippers began arriving in large numbers at 5 p.m., even though people reported authorities had prevented a significant number of buses from embarking on their journey, and that others were intercepted and forced to turn around.

The program began only 30 minutes later than the announced start time of 6 p.m., which organizers regarded as a miracle, and people continued to pour into the venue until well after 7 p.m. while worship music was underway. Those attending enthusiastically participated in loud and joyful praise, and sources cited as especially moving a local choir of hundreds singing "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty."

As they did last year, the Jackson family of six from the United States sang at the rally. The state-controlled media had earlier given ample coverage to the unique sight of the Christian group giving away their CDs in a busy downtown area.

Pastor Ho Tan Khoa was well into his evangelistic message when the lights went out, although sources said that, miraculously, the sound system was not affected. Thousands of people in the crowd opened their cell phones, lighting the darkness with their digital candles. The failure – or cutting – of the electricity did affect the live video broadcast on www.hoithanh.com, but within about 15 minutes power was restored.

After a song and prayer for healing, Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan asked those who wanted to follow Christ to come forward. Hundreds streamed up, and sources said those who arrived first rushed onto the flatbed truck serving as a stage and clung to the large cross. Organizers estimated 2,000 people indicated a first-time decision to follow Christ.

In a fitting closing song, the Jackson family sang both in Vietnamese and English, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Pastor Duong Thanh Lam then graciously thanked the relevant government departments for "recognizing our need to worship" and for "creating the conditions for this event to happen."

Those who follow religion in Vietnam were puzzled that the government went to such lengths to hinder the gathering. They cited the government lock-out of a scheduled Christmas celebration in Hanoi on Dec. 19 as an example of interference that will also long be remembered (see www.compassdirect.org, "Vietnam Authorities Move to Stop Protestant Christmas Events," Dec. 20).

"It seems Vietnam squandered an excellent public relations opportunity at a time when there are renewed efforts in the U.S. Congress to put Vietnam back on the religious liberty blacklist," said one long-time observer.

Some Vietnamese church leaders and international observers have said they believe officials have clamped down on Christmas celebrations this year because they were alarmed at the size of last year's Christmas events.

One church leader told Compass of Directive No. 75 of the Ministry of Interior, an Oct. 15 order that presumably forbids such gatherings. Though no church leader has been shown the directive, an official considered to be sympathetic to Christians told a pastor that the directive orders strict adherence to the Decree on Religion 22. This 2005 decree, the main law governing religion, forbids Christians in unregistered groups from any public gatherings, restricting their religious activity to single family worship in their household.

In practice, sources said, many house churches have experienced considerably more freedom than that. Last year many unregistered groups were allowed, though reluctantly, to hold large public Christmas gatherings in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

The unregistered house churches are becoming increasingly frustrated. Most have tried to register their congregations according to existing laws but have either been refused or ignored. The freedoms that members of registered churches enjoy are not available for unregistered Christians, sources said, and unregistered Christians are unable to register.

Many speculate that concern over security in the run-up to the January 2011 Party Congress, held every five years, is one reason for the government's approach. Whatever the reason, all concerned church leaders agreed that the efforts to stop the large Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City Christmas events this year were ordered from the top level of government. No leaders said they believe the obstacles resulted merely from disagreements and delays among government departments, as it was sometimes made to appear.

A number of other events held in public venues by the registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) went ahead peacefully. The largest one in Ho Chi Minh City on Dec. 17 attracted an estimated 9,000 people, with about 1,000 indicating a desire to follow Christ.

In some places, unregistered house church organizations held small Christmas events without difficulty. According to one count, at least 6,000 people throughout Vietnam indicated a first-time decision to follow Christ in this year's Christmas events.

Vietnam authorities move to stop Protestant Christmas events

Apparent central government crackdown puts halt to Yuletide celebrations in five areas

Compass Direct (20.12.2010) / HRWF (21.12.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In what appeared to be part of a central government crackdown on Protestant Christianity in Vietnam, hundreds of Christians from 10 northern provinces were locked out of a Christmas celebration that was supposed to take place here yesterday.

The throngs who arrived at the National Convention Center (NCC) in the Tu Kiem district of Hanoi for the Christmas event found the doors locked and a phalanx of police trying to

send them away, sources said. Deeply disappointed, some of the Christians began singing and praying in the square in front to the center, they said.

Police moved in, striking some Christians with fists and night sticks in the melee that followed. A number of video clips of the action were posted online by Monday morning (Dec. 20), Hanoi time. Christian leaders worked to calm the disappointed crowd, which eventually left, but not before at least six people – including the Rev. Nguyen Huu Bao, the scheduled speaker at the event – were arrested. They had not been released at press time.

Similar incidents occurred on Christmas Sunday (Dec. 19) in at least four other places throughout the country.

Unregistered house churches under the umbrella of the Hanoi Christian Fellowship rented the auditorium in the name of one of their members. A copy of the six-page contract obtained by Compass says the event was to be a reunion of Vietnamese who had worked in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. Many of northern Vietnam's house church leaders became Christians during their time there.

While it was understood that this was to be a Christmas event, the managers of the state-owned facility did not want to put this in writing. Organizers had hoped that some 4,000 people would come.

The contract called for at least five days' written notice before the event if either side wanted to terminate the contract. According to one source, the NCC informed event organizers on Dec. 15, four days before the event, that the contract was voided but gave no reasons as the contract required. The organizers, having completed major preparations and distributed several thousand invitations, considered this a breach of contract and decided to try to go ahead.

When the first Christians arrived Sunday afternoon, they found the doors of the NCC locked. According to a source at the scene, a sign indicated a wedding was taking place. When more than 1,000 people had arrived, some decided to sing and pray in the square in front of the NCC. Police called for reinforcements.

One witness said "possibly hundreds" of uniformed and plainclothes personnel came to try to disperse the growing crowd. Reports from the scene and video clips on the Web show pushing and shoving, with some Christian leaders trying desperately to calm the agitated crowd. Some witnesses said officials punched some Christians, and others were struck hard with night sticks. Late police reinforcements carried electric cattle prods, according to one source. In one clip, people can be seen comforting an 86-year-old woman who was knocked down.

Gradually the Christians dispersed. For many Christians who tried to come – some from great distances and at great personal expense – this would have marked the first time they had ever worshipped in a large gathering.

Sources in Vietnam told Compass that similar stoppages also took place yesterday (Dec. 19) in Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, and Quang Nam provinces, and in the city of Danang in central Vietnam.

In Thanh Hoa province, Christians of various house church denominations planned a joint celebration yesterday at the home of a woman identified only as Tuyet in Dong Phu commune. Pastor Ho Van Thom sent an appeal to the church worldwide asking for the prayers. He arrived at the scene to find some Christians had been beaten and wounded by police intent on preventing their Christmas worship.

In Danang city in central Vietnam, the Rev. Ho Tan Khoa, superintendent of the unregistered United Presbyterian Church of Vietnam, was invited to preach at a house church Christmas celebration yesterday. Pastor Khoa reported that a distraught church leader told him authorities had come that morning and, without a warrant, carted off the chairs, the pulpit and the sound system. They also tore down the Christmas decorations including a backdrop painstakingly decorated by church members, he said.

In Ho Chi Minh City, house churches have received permission for a public Christmas celebration both from authorities of the central government in Hanoi and of Ho Chi Minh City for an event on Dec. 26. But church leaders say that potential venue owners, obviously under threat, will not dare rent to them.

Even those who closely follow Protestant church developments in Vietnam were somewhat surprised at the severity of the crackdown. One well-respected overseas Vietnam leader observed that it is now clear that this was a coordinated, well-planned and executed crackdown involving top Communist Party and government officials.

He noted that sometimes officials in remote areas of the country are excused when they persecute Christians on the grounds they do not yet know the new, more enlightened religion policies of the central government.

"In this case," he said, "the strong actions against Christians are taking place in Vietnam's three largest cities. They can't use that excuse."

Another observer said that authorities likely became alarmed at the size and attraction of the Christmas events in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi last Christmas. The events in those two cities attracted more than 50,000 people. They were organized by unregistered house churches that somehow obtained permission in spite of prohibitions of such events by Vietnam's Decree 22, which governs religion.

One key church leader in Vietnam informed Compass that Directive No. 75, a secret Ministry of Interior document dated Oct. 15, ordered the crackdown on unregistered groups.

Unregistered groups are caught in limbo. Denominations with a history before the 1975 communist takeover of Vietnam have now been registered, but many groups that began in the 1980s and later have tried but failed to register their congregations as provided by Vietnam's regulations. Their requests have mostly been ignored or denied, leaving them vulnerable to capricious repression.

As Christmas Day draws near, it appears the 400,000 or so Protestants that belong to unregistered churches will be denied celebrating together.

A Con Dau Catholic dies shortly after being released by police

J.B. An Dang

AsiaNews (06.07.2010) / HRWF (07.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Nam Nguyen, a Catholic from Con Dau parish, in the Diocese of Da Nang died last Saturday, just hours after being released by police. The man, already in recent months, had been arrested, beaten and threatened by agents, following protests from residents over the closure of the cemetery of the parish and the announced destruction of their homes to build a tourist centre.

It all started earlier this year, with the local authorities decision to demolish all the houses in the parish, created 135 years ago to build the resort, without offering fair compensation or aid for resettlement. The cemetery of the parish covers an area of 10 hectares, about a mile from the church. For 135 years it has been the only burial place for the faithful and in the past, it was listed in the historical sites protected by the government. Until March 10, when security agents put a sign at the entrance of the cemetery with the inscription "Burials are forbidden in this area". When a parishioner went to protest, the head of the police sprayed tear gas in his face, causing him to faint.

On May 4, during the procession for the funeral of Mary Tan, 82, police intervened to prevent the burial in the cemetery. For almost an hour there were clashes (pictured) between the 500 parishioners and agents, leaving many Catholics wounded and 59 people arrested. The coffin was taken from the woman's family and was later cremated, against the wishes she had expressed, to be buried next to her husband and members of his family, in the old parish cemetery.

The Vietnamese government denied that there were Catholics arrested or injured. According to the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, Nguyen Phuong Nga, "this information is false and aimed only at slandering Vietnam". "The truth - he said - is that this affair has nothing to do with religion".

Instead the incident was denounced by the bishop of Da Nang in central Vietnam, Mgr. Joseph Chau Ngoc Tri, who in a pastoral letter of May 6 condemned the incident and asked the faithful and controlling authorities to avoid further violence. "The police went in search of other faithful," wrote the bishop.

His claims were backed up by the news that on May 17, six parishioners were charged by the authorities of the province of Da Nang for "disturbing public order" and "attacking state security and administration personnel who were carrying out their duties according to law."

Among the six, Nam Nguyen, who was arrested and released. Subsequently he was again summoned by the officials, who tried to force him to lay charges against other faithful. Upon his refusal he was savagely beaten. Saturday he was released and a few hours later, he died. Fear now reigns in the village.

Forced recantations of faith continue in Vietnam

New Christians in northwest violently compelled to return to ancestor worship

Compass Direct (18.01.2010) / HRWF (19.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Vietnamese man violently forced to recant his fledgling Christian faith faces pressure from authorities and clansmen to prove his return to traditional Hmong belief by sacrificing to ancestors next month.

Sung Cua Po, who embraced Christianity in November, received some 70 blows to his head and back after local officials in northwest Vietnam's Dien Bien Province arrested him on Dec. 1, 2009, according to documents obtained by Compass. His wife, Hang thi Va, was also beaten. They live in Ho Co village.

Dien Bien Dong District and Na Son Commune police and soldiers led by policeman Hang A Senh took the Christian couple to the Na Son Commune People's Committee office after police earlier incited local residents to abuse and stone them and other Christian families. After Po and his wife were beaten at 1 a.m. that night, he was fined 8 million dong

(US\$430) and a pig of at least 16 kilos. His cell phone and motorbike were confiscated, according to the documents.

Christians Sung A Sinh and Hang A Xa of Trung Phu village were also beaten about the head and back and fined a pig of 16 kilos each so that local authorities could eat, according to the reports. The documents stated that the reason for the mistreatment of the Christians was that they abandoned "the good and beautiful" traditional Hmong beliefs and practices to follow Protestant Christianity.

Christian sources reported that on Dec. 15 police took Po and his wife to members of their extended family, who applied severe clan pressure on him to deny their faith. When police added their own threats, Po finally signed recantation documents.

"I folded - I signed when police threatened to beat me to death if I didn't recant," he said. "Then they would seize my property, leaving my wife a widow, and my children fatherless - without a home."

Following Po's written recantation, authorities subjected him to further family and clan pressure and "fines," as well as rites to satisfy traditional Hmong spirits said to have become upset when he offended them by becoming a Christian.

Po faces the ultimate test to prove his recantation is sincere on Feb. 13, Lunar New Year's Eve. He remains under severe threat, the documents report, unless he voluntarily offers sacrifices to his ancestors at that time.

The documentation of the forced recantations in northwest Vietnam indicates authorities are contravening Vietnam's 2004/2005 public religion policy.

All three men had received a summons dated Dec. 11, 2009 to appear at the Na Son Commune Peoples' Committee office at 7:30 a.m. on Dec. 15 "to take care of business relating to following the Vang Chu religion."

The officials' use of the Vang Chu religion in these documents was said to be significant. Vang Chu is a mythological Hmong savior who, it is believed, will unite and deliver the Hmong. For some time Vietnamese authorities have deliberately misnamed Protestantism as Vang Chu in order to give Christianity a threatening political character. Any real or imagined political opposition provides Vietnamese communists with a carte blanche excuse to apply repressive measures, Christian sources said.

One of the other Christians arrested, Xa, has received another summons handwritten by the chief of Trung Phu village, Hang A Po, "to solve the issue of the Vang Chu religion." The summons ordered Xa to appear without fail at the home of village chief Po in mid-December and to bring sufficient food, including a 15-to-20 kilo pig, to feed everyone.

"Here is Vietnamese jungle justice on full display - show up at the home of an official to be tormented and bring plenty of food and liquor for your tormentors," observed one source.

The summons purports to represent district and commune police who will be present, as well as the village chief.

"It is clear that in spite of public national policies outlawing forced recantation, to the contrary, Dien Bien government policy to force new Christian believers to recant is being vigorously implemented," said one source.

This conclusion is consistent with other findings. In November 2009 religious liberty advocates acquired a Vietnamese language booklet entitled "Some Documents

Concerning Religious Belief and Religion." The 104-page document "For Internal Circulation" was published in November 2007 by the Dien Bien Province Department of Ethnic Minorities.

The collection of documents, including some marked "Secret," clearly shows Dien Bien religion policies and directives relative to Protestants are different than the "new religion legislation" of 2004/2005. The Dien Bien documents reveal a secret "Guidance Committee 160" is overseeing repressive policies initiated before the new religion legislation of 2004/2005 that continue to guide officials.

"These events and findings in Dien Bien clearly show that the excuse given by our government that such events are isolated exceptions perpetrated by a few bad officials is not believable," said one church leader.

Vietnam denies harassing Zen Buddhist group

EarthTimes (11.01.2010) / HRWF (12.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Vietnam said Monday that the expulsion of foreign-affiliated Zen monks and nuns from a monastery stemmed from an internal dispute between Buddhist sects, and denied the group had been harassed by government officials and police. Members of the Plum Village Zen Buddhist sect said harassment by mobs including undercover police forced them to leave two monasteries in southern Vietnam's Lam Dong province between September and December.

The group is affiliated with France-based Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Nguyen Thanh Xuan, deputy chairman of the government's Committee on Religious Affairs, said the group's monks and nuns had clashed with other clerics at the Bat Nha monastery over matters of Buddhist practice and property.

"Everything would have gone smoothly if not for the dispute between followers of the Plum Village practice, and the monks and nuns residing permanently at Bat Nha monastery," Xuan said.

Xuan said internal friction was also responsible for the Plum Village monastics' forced departure in December from nearby Phuoc Hue Pagoda. Phuoc Hue's abbot had offered them refuge after they were forced out of Bat Nha.

Asked why internet videos of the clashes showed mobs of people wearing street clothes, clearly from outside the monastery, harassing the Plum Village monastics and calling on them to leave, officials offered no clear explanation.

"This was internal friction between the Plum Village group and the Bat Nha authorities," said Nguyen Ngoc Dong, vice chairman of the Lam Dong provincial People's Committee. "The local authority has never intervened."

Followers of Thich Nhat Hanh said the group faces discrimination inside Vietnam since a 2008 meeting between the Zen sage and Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet. Hanh reportedly suggested to Triet that Vietnam end government regulation of religion.

Senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Dang Ho Phat said the government had tried to arrange a diplomatic meeting in France to resolve the dispute in October, but that Hanh refused.

Hanh's followers said he had received the invitation too late to reschedule a planned trip to the United States.

Hanh, 83, became famous as a leader of South Vietnam's Buddhist Movement in the 1960s, and has tens of thousands of followers in Europe and North America.

He was allowed to return to Vietnam in 2005 after 40 years in exile, and his spiritual gatherings drew large crowds. But he reportedly fell out of favor after advocating that the government cease regulating religious affairs.

The Communist government requires all religious groups to be registered with the authorities, although in recent years it has approved many new sects.
