

Table of Contents

- ***Lao officials force Christians to recant for burial***
 - ***Lao officials: Give up your faith or face eviction***
 - ***Lao officials seize church building, convert it into school***
 - ***Imprisoned Lao pastor 'extremely weak,' family says***
 - ***Why Laos restricts religious freedom***
 - ***Lao officials arrest 11 Christians at gunpoint***
-

Lao officials force Christians to recant for burial

Separately in Boukham village, authorities move Christians to animal pen

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct News (30.12.11) / HRWF (18.01.12) – Officials this week forced Christians in a Lao village to give up their faith in order to bury a family member in the village graveyard, according to advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

In Huey, Ad-Sapangthong district of Savannakhet Province, where immediate burial is essential in the hot tropical climate, the village's eight Christian families quickly began to arrange a funeral for the deceased, a woman who died on Christmas Day who went by the single name of Wang. On Monday (Dec. 26), however, village officials ordered that her body be buried according to Buddhist funeral rites or be taken to a burial ground in Savannakhet city, HRWLRF reported.

Lacking the resources for a city burial, the 40 Christians reluctantly agreed. But the village monk then refused to carry out the ceremony because Wang was a Christian.

On Tuesday (Dec. 27), district officials summoned representatives of the Christian community in Huey to their headquarters in Ad-Sapangthong. HRWLRF reported that one of them told the Christians, "Don't do anything with the dead body; let the body rot if you insist on clinging to the Christian faith."

With Wang's body already decomposing, the Christians verbally agreed to cease practicing their faith in order to bury her in the village cemetery, according to HRWLRF.

Once the funeral was over, five of the families told church leaders in another city that they regretted their decision and that they would continue to worship God.

On Wednesday (Dec. 28), sources close to district officials told HRWLRF that they suspected two people were directly responsible for the refusal of a Christian burial in Huey village as well as the Dec. 16 arrests of eight Christian leaders for gathering some 200 church members for a Christmas celebration in Boukham village (See www.compassdirect.org, "Lao Officials Arrest Eight Christian Leaders," Dec. 19). They identified the two as Major Gad, a former military officer now serving as deputy district chief of Ad-Sapangthong and also as head of religious affairs in the district; and the district commissioner, identified by the single name Pornsai.

Still in Stocks

Following the release of one of the Christian leaders, Boukham village authorities have moved six of the detained Christians to an animal pen, blocked visits from family members and banned direct delivery of food, local sources told HRWLRF.

Another detainee had been released temporarily to attend a government training session, but he is now being held with the others. The seven Christians are being held in wooden stocks.

When last seen, the health of one of the detained leaders, identified as Puphet, had clearly deteriorated; Puphet suffers from a kidney ailment. The legs of six of the detainees, but particularly those of Puphet, Wanta and Oun, were swollen and infected, according to HRWLRF.

"This is because their legs, being fastened in wooden stocks, are raised higher than their bottoms, obstructing blood flow," a spokesman from HRWLRF told Compass. "The stocks are also causing excruciating physical pain and bruises."

Family members fear that authorities may employ starvation tactics in order to force the six to give up their faith, the spokesman added.

In neighboring Nattoo village, 47 Christians threatened with expulsion on Dec. 21 were able to worship on Christmas day without interruption, the spokesman said. Officials have yet to carry out the threatened expulsion.

Lao officials: Give up your faith or face eviction

Days after church leaders arrested, officials target 47 Christians in neighboring village

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct News (23.12.2012) – Nearly 50 Christians await their fate today after officials in Nattoo village, southern Laos, on Wednesday (Dec. 21) summoned four of their leaders and warned that they would evict the entire church "within 24 hours" if they refused to give up their faith.

Officials told the Christians they had forfeited their right to live in the village because of their faith, the advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported.

Established just two years ago, the church in Nattoo village, Palansai district of Savannakhet Province meets every week in the home of church leader Sompu. The forty-seven members include men, women and children belonging to four extended families.

Immediately after the discussion with Nattoo officials, Sompu reported the incident to sub-district police, but at press time district officials had not intervened, according to HRWLRF.

"We are alarmed because the police and military seem to have taken over authority from the religious affairs department in Savannakhet," a spokesman from HRWLRF told Compass.

Religious affairs staff should take action, he added, because village officials have violated Lao law, the Constitution and international human rights standards by threatening eviction on the basis of religious belief.

The Nattoo eviction notice came less than a week after officials in Boukham village, just five kilometers away from Nattoo, arrested eight church leaders for organizing a Christmas event attended by some 200 Christians. The arrests – and putting seven of the leaders in wooden stocks – came even though Christians had secured permission for the event. (See www.compassdirect.org, “Lao Officials Arrest Eight Christian Leaders,” Dec. 19.)

Two of the church leaders have since been released after paying steep fines, the first on Sunday (Dec. 18) and the second one this morning, according to a source who preferred to go unnamed.

“We are at a critical juncture,” the HRW LRF spokesman told Compass. “Persecution is likely to spread without strong intervention from central government.”

HRW LRF strongly suspects the involvement of higher-level officials in these incidents.

“It is unheard of that a village headquarters would have access to wooden stocks – they have to obtain them from district or provincial authorities,” the spokesman explained. “So it’s clear that the arrest in Boukham was pre-planned and was approved by at least the district officials and possibly provincial authorities as well.”

Police List

Six of the eight church leaders arrested in Boukham were still detained in wooden stocks at press time.

Representatives of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), the only Protestant denomination recognized by the Lao government, on Sunday (Dec. 18) paid a fine of 1 million kip (US\$123) to secure the release of the eighth leader, identified by the single name Kingmanosorn, who pastors a church in Savannakhet city.

A second detainee was released yesterday after paying the same fine, a source who preferred to go unnamed told Compass today.

“Seven of the eight leaders initially detained in Boukham were on a police list to be arrested for the Christmas event,” a spokesman from HRW LRF told Compass. “The police had been following them because they were actively building the church and spreading the faith. However, Kingmanosorn was not on the list.”

Last year, when Boukham officials gave permission for a Christmas event, the village chief spoke to the 70-odd Christians who had gathered and gave them his blessing. In December 2009, however, officials tore down the tent where some 40 Christians had gathered to celebrate Christmas. At that time there were no arrests.

In July 2008, district police stormed into the home of Pastor Sompong in Boukham and ordered the approximately 60 Christians present to cease worshipping God or face imprisonment. When they refused, officials arrested Sompong, three other leaders identified as Kai, Sisompu and Phuphet, and Kunkham, the 17-year-old daughter of Phuphet. Police took all five to a district prison and charged them with spreading the Christian faith and conducting a religious meeting without permission. (See www.compassdirect.org, “Authorities Detain 90 Christians,” Aug. 8, 2008.)

Police released them two days later after Christians from Savannakhet city intervened, arguing that the Boukham Christians were neither spreading their faith nor holding a public meeting – but simply worshiping God in a private residence. The five were ordered to pay a fine of 350,000 kip (then US\$42) for expenses related to the arrest.

Officials re-arrested Sompong along with two other leaders in August 2008. Although Boukham's chief had threatened to sentence them to life terms in a maximum security prison and ordered family members to renounce their faith, local and international advocacy efforts secured their release in October 2008. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Officials Release Christians from Stocks," Nov. 17, 2008.)

The present chief of Boukham has been in office for just six months and has not shown any antagonism towards Christian residents until now, HRWLRF told Compass.

Lao officials seize church building, convert it into school

10 Christians evicted from homes in another village, while those in Katin ordered to pay fines

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct News (26.09.2011) / HRWF (27.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Authorities in Laos forcibly confiscated a church building in Savannakhet Province on Sept. 14 due to lack of official permission; the church had not applied for a building permit as the country routinely denies such applications, sources said.

Christians in Laos often do not risk applying for a building permit as it draws unwanted attention and can preempt any chance of building a simple structure, Christian sources said; authorities generally ignore a lack of building permit if religious groups cause no problems.

The confiscation of the Dongpaiwan village church building by Saybuli district officials, police and military personnel came shortly after officials in Nonsawang village, also in Savannakhet, ordered 10 Christians evicted from the village in July to leave the temporary shelters they had built on their rice paddies, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported today. Nonsawang village chief Khamsing, identified only by a single name as is common in Laos, told the Christians they could only return to their homes or rice paddies if they gave up their faith, according to a spokesman from HRWLRF.

Such forced renunciations of faith along with detentions, surveillance, harassment and confiscation of property have kept Laos on the "watch list" of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) since 2009. In this year's report, the USCIRF clearly identified ethnic minority Protestants as the primary target of such violations.

Catch-22

The Christians of Dongpaiwan village could only stand back as Saybuli officials, including district head Khamman, police chief Nokan and religious affairs officer Bountha, accompanied by some 20 military and police personnel, seized their land, church building and fish pond, HRWLRF reported.

Officials have since posted soldiers on guard, moved in desks and chairs and converted the 212-member congregation's building into a government school. Christians are no longer allowed onto the property, according to HRWLRF.

While the nation's constitution provides for freedom of worship, including the right to build houses of worship, Lao officials have routinely turned down building applications for unregistered churches, church members told HRWLRF.

Many rural Protestant churches prefer not to come under the umbrella of the tightly controlled, government-approved Lao Evangelical Church. In such cases congregations often erect a simple building without a permit.

In fact constitutional religious freedoms such as the right to establish a place of worship are often abrogated by the Prime Minister's 2002 Decree on Religious Practice (Decree 92), which allows for government control of and interference in religious activities, the USCIRF noted in its 2011 report.

The seizure of the Dongpaiwan church building puts at risk some 20 other simple church structures built without permits in Savannakhet Province, sources said.

While the Dongpaiwan church was founded in 1978, construction of their building only began in 2010 and was completed this April.

Dongpaiwan church members have since resorted to meeting in private homes – an activity also deemed illegal by many local authorities, according to HRWLRF.

More Christians Expelled

In late August, officials in Nonsawang village, Thapangthong district of Savannakhet, ordered 10 Christians living on their rice paddies to renounce their faith or abandon their fields, according to a report issued Friday (Sept. 23) by HRWLRF.

The Christians are still refusing to give up their faith but have not yet been evicted from the rice paddies, HRWLRF confirmed today.

Village chief Khamsing and the village religious affairs official had previously pressured the Christians to give up their faith in July. When they refused, officials marched all 10 – including two young children – out of the village with only the possessions they could carry. Lacking the required permit to live elsewhere, the Christians took up residence in small grass huts in their rice fields, HRWLRF reported.

All 10 are members of an extended family: a couple in their 50s, Desorn and Sorpen; their daughter and son-in-law, Pin and Bountha, both 25; their son and daughter-in-law Pai and Toey, 23 and 22, along with their 2-year-old grandson Yona; a second son named Somjal, 18, and a second daughter named Boukham, 10.

The young children are suffering from the poor living conditions, a spokesman told Compass. HRWLRF is appealing to the Lao government to ensure the rights of families in Nonsawang village and in Katin village of Saravan Province, where authorities continue to oppress evicted Christians.

Katin Christians Ordered to Pay Fines

In Saravan Province, three of the 19 families expelled from Katin village in Ta-Oih district in December 2010 and in January recently returned to the village, joining two resident families who believed in Christ after the evictions last December and a further three families who more recently professed faith in Christ.

Village officials, however, ordered the eight families to pay steep fines for their faith.

"So far, the threats are only verbal, and the Christians have refused," an HRWLRF spokesman told Compass. "But officials have asked each family to hand over a pig. One pig has the same value as four to six months of rice production."

On a more positive note, arrangements have now been made for evicted children to receive education, either in local schools or at a boarding school in Savannakhet. The Christians also have access to medical care at the Ta-Oih district hospital if needed, the spokesman said.

But local officials have made no attempt to provide permanent living accommodations or land holdings for the 16 families still living at the edge of the jungle, according to HRWLRF. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Christians Deprived of Food, Water at 'Critical Stage,'" Feb. 25)

Imprisoned Lao pastor 'extremely weak,' family says

Two church leaders in prison; conditions improve for expelled Katin Christians

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct News (08.07.2011) / HRWF (12.07.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Lao pastor imprisoned six months ago for holding a "secret meeting" has lost weight under harsh prison conditions and is extremely weak, according to his family.

Police arrested Wanna and fellow pastor and inmate Yohan, both identified only by a single name, on Jan. 4 along with several other Christians in central Laos's Khammouan Province.

Prison authorities have repeatedly told the men that they will "walk free" as soon as they sign documents renouncing their faith, advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) said in a press statement today.

Wanna is the pastor of an unregistered church in Nakoon village, Hinboun district, while Yohan pastors a similar church in nearby Tonglar village.

Hinboun district police arrested Wanna, Yohan and nine others at gunpoint on Jan. 4 and charged them with holding a "secret meeting" after they celebrated Christmas without prior approval. Police then loaded the Christians onto a truck and took them to Khammouan provincial prison in Takkhet City. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Lao Officials Arrest 11 Christians at Gunpoint," Jan. 6)

By Jan. 6 police had released eight of the detainees – including two children ages 4 and 8 – after they paid fines. A ninth prisoner, identified only as Kane, was released shortly afterwards, HRWLRF reported.

Wanna and Yohan were the principal breadwinners for their families. Their imprisonment left their wives and families with no means of financial support; several of Wanna's children have since left school to find work, according to HRWLRF.

Harsh conditions in the prison have also taken their toll on Wanna; after a recent visit, family members observed that he had lost weight, contracted an infection and seemed

extremely weak, according to HRWLRF.

The families have appealed for advocacy as both men remain in prison on charges directly related to their faith.

"Our greatest concern right now is for these two men," a HRWLRF spokesman confirmed to Compass. "Presently, relatively speaking, there is less opposition and persecution of Christians, but these men need help."

A report issued in May by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom states that while Protestants in urban areas last year reported an increased ability to "worship without restrictions," provincial authorities continued to "severely violate freedom of religion or belief, particularly of ethnic minority Protestants." Rights abuses including "detentions, surveillance, harassment, property confiscation, forced relocations and forced renunciations of faith" in 2010 have kept Laos on the Commission's Watch List for 2011.

Rice, Wells Needed for Katin Christians

In Katin village in Ta-Oih district, Saravan Province, conditions for a group of Christians expelled from the village last year have vastly improved since the beginning of the dry season in February, when the group resorted to begging for food. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Christians Deprived of Food, Water at 'Critical Stage,'" Feb. 25)

"They're still living at the edge of the jungle, but they're in good health, with a good supply of rainwater and food from the jungle," the HRWLRF spokesman said. "Each family is now growing rice on a few hectares of land near their settlement. But they will need a supply of rice every month until their first harvest matures in mid-September."

If authorities permit, the Christians also hope to dig wells in the coming months to ensure a more permanent water supply over the next dry season.

Officials marched 11 Christian families, totaling 48 people, out of Katin village at gunpoint in January 2010 after they repeatedly refused to give up their faith. The officials left them to find shelter about six kilometers (nearly four miles) outside the village and confiscated the Christians' homes, livestock, and essential registration documents. A further seven families, totaling 15 people, were forced to leave the village last December.

Villagers then thwarted the Christians' efforts to plant rice on commonly-owned village land and warned people in neighboring villages not to assist the Christians as they were "breaking the law" by following Christ – even though provincial-level authorities had told the Christians they had the right to worship as they chose.

In recent months, district authorities have tacitly recognized the expelled Christians as a group separate from other Katin villagers and allowed them to remain in their temporary settlement, the HRWLRF spokesman said. Other villagers oppose their faith but are presently "not causing any trouble" and in fact a few Christians living in Katin quietly join the outcasts for worship without harassment.

"The district authorities directly oversee them and provide education for their children," he said. "However, they don't provide physical help."

Authorities have allowed some of the children to attend school in nearby Ta-Oih township and allowed others to relocate to an orphanage in Savannakhet, where they have better living conditions and access to education.

The situation is not fully resolved, however, as the Katin Christians have no official

documentation stating their right to remain at the edge of the jungle, let alone their right to worship.

Why Laos restricts religious freedom

WEA-RLC (25.04.2011) / HRWF (10.01.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Troops of the Lao People's Army (LPA) caught a group of Hmong Christians, confiscated their Bible and shot to death four women – after repeatedly raping two of them – forcing their husbands and children to witness the disgraceful and gruesome act on April 15.

US-based think-tank Center for Public Policy Analysis reported that soldiers from a special 150-member unit of the LPA, led by Vietnamese secret police and military advisers, were responsible for the incident in north-eastern Xiengkhouang Province.

Another US-based group, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom, reported that district police in Khammouan Province unlawfully detained 11 church leaders and believers around last Christmas, and officials of Katin village in Salavan Province expelled seven Christian families early this year.

Contrary to the notion that Laos, a communist state, has improved its religious freedom record over the last few years, especially after the United States gave it the (non-permanent) normal trade status in 2004, appears to be false. News from Laos does not reach the outside world, in time or ever, thanks to the absence of free press and lack of information infrastructure in the country.

Persecution of Christians, mostly from ethnic minority Protestant groups, which includes expulsion from village, forced relocation, pressure to renounce faith, detention and arrest, destruction of livestock and crop and closure of churches, is routine in provincial areas, especially in the provinces of Bolikhamxai, Houaphan, Salavan, Luanprabang, Attapeu, Oudamsai and Luang Namtha.

The Hmong Christian community in Laos (the Hmong, ethnic minority, allied with the United States in the Vietnam War and later during the civil war in Laos) is persecuted not only by the governments of Laos and Vietnam, but also by Hmong insurgents who have existed since the end of the Vietnam War. The insurgents seek to recruit Hmong Christians – a move opposed by most Christian leaders – and, at times, they attack those who resist or oppose them. And in their operations against the rebel group, Lao security forces indiscriminately target Hmong villages often destroying churches and homes out of suspicion.

Protestant Christianity in general, and the Hmong Christian community in particular, is seen by sections of the Lao society and the authorities as an American or imperialist "import" into the country and a threat to the communist rule.

While Laos has undergone some economic and cultural reforms, the country remains a single party state ruled by the Marxist-Leninist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) since the end of the Laotian civil war in 1975. The primary focus of "the party" has been to retain political power – one of the main reasons behind civil restrictions.

Part of the problem is that Laos is a narrow, landlocked country sharing borders with five, mostly stronger, nations: Vietnam, China, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. Many of the provinces border two countries – Thailand and Vietnam – and most of Laos' frontier areas are impoverished, lacking basic infrastructure. So the Laotian regime maintains a tight control over the social life.

In addition, the country's proximity – both geographic and ideological – to Vietnam in particular is not helpful vis-à-vis religious freedom. Vietnam, too, is a single-party communist state. Moreover, Laos had a restive history with the United States, from the Vietnam War to the Civil War in Laos in the 1970s. Laos has diplomatic relations with Washington, but it remains cautious.

The party has been reluctant to grant those civil rights – or to the degree – that may threaten its exclusive political hold over the country. Rights of the people end – on paper or on the ground – precisely where such a threat is perceived.

The LPRP has allowed neither political opposition nor free press, nor civil society – or any other democratic institution that can challenge the power of or oppose the one-party regime – to take birth in the country. The people elect members of the National Assembly, the unicameral parliament, but it is known to be a rubber stamp of party's decisions.

Religious organisations and institutions have been allowed to function, but only as long as they remain under government surveillance and control.

The Prime Minister's 2002 Decree on Religious Practice – known as Decree 92 – passed to showcase religious freedom in the country gave some freedoms but also allowed government control of and interference in all religious activities and required all religious organisations to register with the government. The Decree did legalise religious activities previously deemed as illegal – including propagation, printing of religious material, ownership and construction of places of worship, and forming an association with religious groups from other countries – but subject to state approval. In addition, it banned any religious activity that could potentially create "social division" or "chaos" – leaving their definitions to the discretion of the authorities.

Around 60 percent of the 6.8 million people in Laos are followers of Theravada Buddhism, which enjoys a special status in the Lao society and is officially promoted by the "communist" government. The party apparently seeks to achieve political goals and suppress smaller religious denominations by co-opting the majority religion. It exempts Buddhism from most of the restrictions imposed on other religions, but maintains its control over the Buddhist clergy.

Among the Christian groups operating in the country, the government recognises only the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church and the Seventh Day Adventists. It pressures other small independent Protestant congregations to come under one of the recognised groups – so that it can exercise control over them with greater ease and more efficiently – and refuses to recognise them independently. While the Decree does not mention how unrecognised groups should be dealt with, experience shows that their activities are seen by authorities as illegal and their members and leaders are detained and arrested under various pretexts.

Human rights group Amnesty International estimated that at least 90 ethnic minority Protestants were arrested and detained without charge or trial between July and September 2009 alone. Officials who abuse their powers are hardly punished.

It is the mandate of the Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO) to scrutinise implementation of laws by the authorities and prosecute in case of a contravention. However, practically, this is not possible given the party's almost complete hold over it.

Besides, breach of law by officials takes place mainly in rural areas where the people are mostly poor and illiterate. Even otherwise, it is common knowledge in the country that the basis of "justice" is not the letter or spirit of law but political/social influence or bribe – a luxury which few Christians have.

Even the judiciary is not independent. The judges are appointed by the National Assembly, all the members of which are from the one and only party in the country. However, given that Laos realizes the need for economic growth – especially when it compares itself with Vietnam – and is open to foreign investment and engagement with countries outside the region, there is scope for advocacy and engagement with this nation.

As a June 2010 briefing by UK-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide recommended, Laos should be encouraged to remove the reservation to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which goes against the spirit of the covenant's aim to protect individual rights, allows for arbitrary interpretation and contains vague wording.

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jehangir, who visited Laos in 2009, recommended a review of the Decree No. 92, saying bureaucratic controls over and impediments to liberty of movement in the context of religious activities should be discontinued. She also suggested that explanatory policy directions be passed on to the provincial and district levels to avoid any discriminatory interpretation. In addition, she noted that members of religious minorities seemed to have little or no access to higher education, and therefore the existing affirmative action schemes must be extended to religious minorities. Further, she called for adequate training of the personnel of detention facilities to raise awareness of their duty to promote and respect international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief.

Laos should be urged to heed Jehangir's recommendations. Laos also needs to introduce administrative reforms providing for accountability of officials to an independent institution.

The rulers in Laos often claim legitimacy of the single-party regime by saying there is no other way to hold a multi-ethnic and impoverished nation together. It is not unusual for a small, landlocked nation to seek greater control – social, cultural and political – but such a regime cannot hope to earn sympathies and respect of the international community as long as it persecutes and restricts basic human rights of its own people, including religious minorities.

Lao officials arrest 11 Christians at gunpoint

Three leaders remain in prison; Christians in three villages forced to renounce their faith

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct (06.01.2011) / HRWF (10.01.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Following the arrest of 11 Christians at gunpoint on Tuesday (Jan. 4), three house church leaders remain behind bars for "holding a secret meeting," according to advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

Laos authorities today released six of the house church Christians, including two children ages 4 and 8, from Khammouan Provincial Prison, central Laos. Two other men were released yesterday (Jan. 5).

The charge against the three church leaders is a political offense punishable by law, HRWLRF said. It identified the three men only by their given names as Pastor Wanna

from Nakoon village church, Chanlai from Tonglar village church and Kan from nearby Nahin village church, all in Hinboun district, Khammouan Province.

The other eight Christians initially arrested were identified as Sompon, his wife and two children, along with a man identified only as Wantorn, all from the capital, Vientiane; Bounma and Kay from Nakoon village church, and Pastor Sipan from Dongthai church in Takkek district, Khammouan Province.

Authorities first detained the 11 Christians at gunpoint on Tuesday (Jan. 4) after they gathered at Wanna's home for delayed Christmas celebrations, according to HRWLRF.

In December, Wanna informed authorities that church members would gather at his home on Wednesday (Jan. 5) to celebrate Christmas, in line with official celebrations by the government-approved Lao Evangelical Church scheduled between Dec. 5 and Jan. 15.

A truckload of district police officers with guns cocked and ready to shoot burst into Wanna's house after dark on Tuesday (Jan. 4) shouting, "Stop! Nobody move!" They then forcibly detained the 11 who were quietly sharing an evening meal and charged them with conducting a "secret meeting" without approval.

Police officers released two of the Christians yesterday (Jan. 5) and moved the remaining nine to Khammouan Provincial Prison. A further six, including Sompon's wife and children, were released today, leaving only three key leaders from Khammouan house churches behind bars.

HRWLRF has called for urgent advocacy for the three, on the grounds that officials have charged them with a political offense that may lead to harsh prison terms.

Oppression, Re-Education, Imprisonment

Oppression in Hinboun district, Khammouan Province began in earnest after residents of three villages professed faith in Christ, according to HRWLRF.

In 2008 a handful of Christians began meeting at Wanna's house in Nakoon village. By 2009 the number had grown to 105 people, or 25 families. During that time, local officials repeatedly interrogated Wanna, threatening him with arrest and imprisonment if he did not renounce his faith and cease encouraging others to believe in God.

Wanna, however, continued to hold meetings at his home until officials arrested and imprisoned him last May. Authorities then rounded up the church members and subjected them to several days of re-education, informing them that, "We have fought the Americans for many years, and now you are being deceived and caught by their traps."

The Christians were then forced to sign documents renouncing their faith.

After releasing Wanna in October, officials warned him to practice his faith in private and hold no further meetings at his home. Wanna ignored these warnings, and several families joined him for Sunday worship services.

In December, Wanna informed village authorities that the church would hold Christmas celebrations at his home on Jan. 5, in line with plans by the official Evangelical Church of Laos to hold Christmas celebrations between Dec. 5 and Jan. 15.

Another Christian, Chanlai (also known as Yohan), began sharing his faith in 2008 with the residents of Tonglar village, some five kilometers (nearly three miles) away from Nakoon. By 2009, a total of 15 families had professed faith and began worshipping in Chanlai's home. Authorities arrested Chanlai along with Wanna last May, charging

Chanlai with influencing residents to believe in God and holding worship meetings in his home.

Following Chanlai's arrest, officials detained the other 14 families for a day of re-education and forced them to sign documents renouncing their faith.

In October, when Chanlai and Wanna were released, authorities warned Chanlai that he should desist from holding worship meetings or "be killed."

Another house church was established in 2008 in nearby Nahin village, around five kilometers (nearly three miles) from Nakoon village, with 10 families or 58 Christians meeting at the home of church leader Kan.

Nahin village authorities early last year subjected the Christians to five days of re-education, announcing that, "Whoever believes in the Christian faith is caught in the trap of the enemy!" They also declared that worship meetings were considered to be "secret meetings," a term with political connotations punishable by law.

Under great duress, five families or a total of 27 Christians in Nahin then signed documents renouncing their faith; the others refused, but they refrained from meeting together for fear of further punishment until Wanna was released last October.