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Christians injured in attack in Vietnam denied medical care

House church network leaders finally resort to private hospital far from attack site

Compass Direct News (22.11.11) / HRWF (24.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Three Christians seriously injured during a savage attack near Hanoi on Nov. 13 have been evacuated to an undisclosed hospital in Ho Chi Minh City after several hospitals in the region refused to examine and treat them.

The attack on a church leaders' worship service of an Agape Baptist Church (ABC) house church in Lai Tao village, Bot Xuyen commune, My Duc district left one woman, evangelist Nguyen Thi Lan, with her pelvis broken in two places and with badly damaged internal organs, according to doctors who recommended emergency surgery. Yet previously doctors at three area hospitals had told her and two other seriously injured Christians that they were fine and dismissed them, said Pastor Nguyen Cong Thanh, head of the ABC.

When doctors in Vietnam learn that religious motives play a role in violence, commonly they do not dare to treat or even examine the victims of persecution.

ABC head Nguyen Cong Thanh had rushed north from his base in Ho Chi Minh City to help the church members. The attack took place in the home of the injured Nguyen Thi Lan (not that of pastor Nguyen Danh Chau as previously reported), a recently retired Communist Party official who converted to Christianity only last year.

Within that short time she had led some 50 extended family members, friends and neighbors to the Christian faith, angering a fellow villager identified only by his given name, Khoan. Khoan and his son led a gang into her house and beat several people, leaving pastor Nguyen Danh Chau unconscious and destroying property, sources said. Khoan repeatedly threatened to kill Nguyen Thi Lan, and the gang of about a dozen threatened to kill Nguyen Danh Chau if he continued gathering Christians for worship, the sources said.

ABC head Nguyen Cong Thanh said he tried to obtain medical examinations and treatment for the worst wounded in several government clinics and hospitals in the region, but the injured were

continually told they needed no care. After a nearly a week, the three most severely injured Christians still suffered acute pain, and they suspected serious internal injuries, he sa

Late Friday (Nov. 18), five days after the attack, staff members at one hospital told Nguyen Cong Thanh that there would be no examinations the next day and Sunday, and to come back on Monday (Nov. 21), when examinations were possible.

At that point ABC leaders decided to take the two injured women and wounded man to Ho Chi Minh City, a 1,000-mile, two-hour flight south. They reasoned that even if government hospitals would not take them, they would certainly find some doctors with a conscience in private hospitals, even though such hospitals would be expensive and would require a full-payment deposit before examination and treatment.

Nguyen Thi Lan, who had not been able to eat since the attack, was admitted to a hospital immediately after her examination, as the doctors discovered her doubly broken pelvis and severely injured female organs.

Pastor Nguyen Danh Chau, who had severe bruises on his face and head, had also been kicked in his back, chest and stomach. Doctors diagnosed internal injuries to his kidneys, liver and perhaps other organs. He too was admitted for further observation and treatment. Nguyen Thi Tac, who had been hit with a steel shovel on her chest and stomach as well as her back, was also still in considerable pain, but a medical examination found no serious internal injuries and she was not admitted to the hospital.

In Khoan's rants during the attack, sources said, he charged that the land, now legally owned by Nguyen Thi Lan, had once belonged to his ancestors, implying that the ancestors would be angry that the current residents no longer worshipped them. Blurry cell-phone photos of the attack show a sullen Khoan in a tug-of-war with a woman trying to hang on to the wooden cross he had torn off the wall of the large room the Christians used for worship.

The invading gang destroyed furniture and seriously damaged motorbikes, a small vegetable garden and fruit trees before leaving (see www.compassdirect.org, "House Church Leaders Attacked near Hanoi, Vietnam," Nov. 16), sources said.

The injured Christians wrote a petition to police indicating the articles of the criminal code that had been violated, but officers have done nothing about Khoan's death threats nor helped to redress the damage done to the Christians and their property.

While not opposing the attempt at securing legal redress, the affected Christians' top leader, Nguyen Cong Thanh, encouraged the injured Christians to show forbearance.

"I pray that you will patiently endure your suffering for Jesus' sake without bitterness," he told them. "Know that the blood you spilled is now joined with Christ's blood in suffering."

He said officials have failed to prosecute the perpetrators.

"They remain beyond the reach of the law and dare the authorities and the Christians, saying, 'If we are not imprisoned, we will surely murder Ms. Lan if she ever returns.'"

A long-time Vietnam religious liberty advocate said there is a growing pattern of strong social persecution in Vietnam where new Christian groups flourish.

“It is also the pattern that local police and government officials are loathe to prosecute those who harm Christians or to extend protection to threatened Christian believers,” he said. “In this incident, Christians recognized some police and local officials dressed in civilian clothes among those who took part in the original attack on the house church on Nov. 13.”

House Church leaders attacked near Hanoi, Vietnam

Gang presumably doing bidding of authorities seriously injures men, women, children

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (16.11.2011) / HRWF (21.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – A gang of men attacked leaders of a Baptist house church network near Hanoi on Sunday (Nov. 13), leaving one pastor unconscious and seriously injuring several others, including women and teenage children.

Leaders of the Agape Baptist Church were participating in a spiritual renewal meeting at the home of pastor Nguyen Danh Chau in Lai Tao village, Bot Xuyen commune, My Duc district, when the gang intruded at 9:30 a.m., sources said. Beating people and smashing property, the gang seriously injured more than a dozen participants and warned Nguyen Danh Chau that they would kill him if he continued gathering Christians, the sources in Vietnam said.

With the attack underway, the sources said, some gang members ran outside and announced to the neighborhood, “Oh heavens, the Christian pastors are savagely beating up people!” This attracted a large crowd, which the gang hoped would prevent any Christians from escaping.

The seriously injured Christians included five male pastors, four female pastors and other church leaders, and several of the leaders’ teenage children. The worst wounded, Nguyen Danh Chau, lay unconscious for many hours, and as of midnight Tuesday (Nov. 15), he was still suffering severe chest, stomach and head pain.

One pastor’s wife, Nguyen Thi Lan, was still unable to walk and function normally at press time after she was struck in the stomach and groin. Others remained weak from loss of blood. The Christians were punched in the mouth and face, the chest and the back. Some were savagely kicked as they lay on the floor.

The denomination’s top leader, Nguyen Cong Thanh, who rushed up from the south to visit the beleaguered leaders, reported that he planned to take the injured to a nearby hospital today; he feared, however, that he would encounter resistance. When doctors in Vietnam learn that religious motives play a role in violence, commonly they do not dare to treat or even examine the victims of persecution.

Attacking on the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, observed worldwide by thousands of churches affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance, the gang smashed a dozen plastic chairs, overturned a pulpit and tore a cross from the wall and threw it into a nearby pond, leaving no doubt as to their motivation. They also stole valuable parts from four motorcycles belonging to the pastors before smashing the

remainder of the vehicles. Valued at more than US\$1,000 each, the motorbikes represent a huge loss for the church leaders.

Before leaving, the gang stopped long enough to destroy the family's kitchen garden and fruit trees, sources said.

The Agape Baptist Church is an unregistered house church organization of some 2,200 members who worship regularly in 38 congregations. It was established in 2007. Many of the congregations are located in or near Hanoi and nearby provinces.

Agape Baptist Church head Nguyen Cong Thanh said in a statement Tuesday morning (Nov. 15) that he had met with the injured.

"All they could do was weep, and I also could not prevent my tears from flowing," he said. "Why do they gratuitously beat servants of the Lord like this – what crime have they committed, what enemies have they made? All we want to do is gather people to worship and serve God and our fellowman. And not only that – the gang destroyed four motorcycles and stole safety helmets, shoes and rain coats from people with very modest means. God have mercy!"

In the past few years, official policy toward religion in Vietnam is ostensibly more tolerant than it was previously, so it has become a pattern for police and higher authorities to employ gangs for such anti-Christian attacks, according to Christian leaders in Vietnam. The gang members are rarely identified and never prosecuted.

Vietnam's ranking among countries with persecution of Christians slipped slightly on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2011 World Watch List. With No. 1 being the worst, Vietnam's place on the list deteriorated from No. 21 to number No. 18 last year.

Police-sponsored thugs attack church in central Vietnam

Pastor's father, other relatives seriously injured after authorities disrupt Sunday service

Compass Direct News (03.11.2011) / HRWF (07.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Thugs said to be doing the bidding of local authorities attacked a pastor and his family with iron bars and wooden clubs in central Vietnam on Oct. 23, seriously injuring the heads and arms of the church leader's father and other relatives, sources said.

Twice on the same Sunday that local authorities disrupted a house church service in Phu Quy village near Tam Ky, Quang Nam Province, a gang of about 20 men attacked the father, brother and other family members of pastor Thien An, who was locked in a secure room as his family believed the gang sought to kill him, sources said.

Police had visited his home the week prior to "investigate" the house church, whose application for registration authorities have twice denied, according to the pastor. Church members echoed the sentiment of one Christian that "even a child" could figure out the connection between the gang and the public security police who disrupted their service that morning.

Pastor Thien told the officers he would meet with them after the service, but they barged into the meeting and pulled the plug on the sound system, according to a letter distributed on the Internet from Pastor Thien addressed to "all in the world with a conscience." When church members protested, one officer yelled and threatened to hit the pastor's father, according to his report.

After some time, the “angry police officers, full of threats, left our house of prayer,” according to the pastor.

The report said that at 1 p.m. the same day, some 20 gang members, many of them large and sporting tattoos, came to the house church when only the pastor and his extended family were home. Believing the gang had come to murder the pastor, his family urged him to retreat into a secure, locked interior room.

As the gang members struck his father, brother and others trying to defend the pastor and his family, which included a 1-week-old infant boy, the family prayed hard even as they vigorously resisted. Finally the gang left on their motorcycles threatening to return to “bring this house of God to the ground, and kill all of you,” the pastor reported.

During the attack, Pastor Thien called four levels of police and security officials, but, strangely, no one answered. After the gang left, he called the chief of the provincial police department and secured a promise to investigate.

Alerted by cell phone, church members rushed to the house to support the pastor and his family and prayed with them. Assuming things had settled down, they left in the early evening. But at 8:30 p.m., as the family was locked into their home, they were alarmed at the sound of shouting and breaking glass.

Pastor Thien was anxious to defend his family, but they restrained him from going out to confront the gang, saying he was their main target. As the gang wielding iron bars and wooden clubs viciously attacked Pastor Thien’s father and several others outside the secure room in which the pastor and his family were locked, gang members stationed outside prevented anyone from coming to help.

The gang managed to smash the glass of the door to the secure room, but Pastor Thien’s father, younger brother and an uncle miraculously managed to fend off the attackers, who finally retreated with their weapons, according to the report. Calls to various police offices during this attack also went unanswered, the pastor added.

Photos taken after this attack and posted on YouTube show head wounds on the defenders, blood on the floor and smashed windows. They also record the loud, anguished prayers for justice. Pastor Thien’s younger brother collapsed when the gang retreated and announced he was about to die, but the pastor prayed for him, and some five minutes later he was revived.

The house church, part of the Vietnam Baptist Church (VBC), is the larger of two legally registered denominations related to the U.S. Southern Baptist Church. Though the denomination is fully and nationally registered, local officials apparently consider the well-established congregation in Phu Quy village to be illegal.

The pastor, who reported that local authorities had refused two attempts to register his church, stated that police have summoned some of his members, especially young women, and strongly pressured them to stop worshipping there; some succumbed to serious threats and signed documents pledging to do so.

Police also recently summoned the pastor and warned that if he continued convening worship, they would not take responsibility if someone attacked it, he reported.

The Quang Nam provincial leader of the VBC contacted by Compass did not visit the affected church until the following Sunday (Oct. 30). He confirmed the incident had taken place and said the church met without incident that day.

Pastor Thien's superior said he would try again to help the church to register with local authorities.

Several days after the attack, top officials of the VBC in Ho Chi Minh City reported that they had not received Pastor Thien's appeal and seemed oddly reluctant to publicly support their beleaguered congregation in Tam Ky. Reliable sources told Compass that the leaders' reluctance stemmed from fear of confronting authorities and putting at risk what they consider a good relationship with the government.

The pastor's appeal and the subsequent YouTube clips, however, were widely distributed by other church leaders in Vietnam who were incensed and sickened by the blatant attack on fellow Christian worshippers.

"Even if there were irregularities on the church side in the registration process, it could in no way justify such a brutal attack in which government authorities are complicit," one house church leader in Vietnam told Compass. "But this is still our country's version of rule-of-law."

Authorities try to portray cult gathering as Christian

Compass Direct News (06.05.2011) / HRWF (06.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The government tried to portray several thousand Hmong followers of a sub-Christian messianic cult as orthodox Christians while the military forcibly disbanded their gathering yesterday and today. The cult members recruited from orthodox Christian groups – vulnerable to false teaching in a country where Christians cannot print their own Bibles and are subject to other restrictions – had gathered for religious reasons in Muong Nhe district, Dien Bien Province, but it turned into a confrontation before local defense forces disbanded them, bolstered by Vietnam People's Army reinforcements hastily dropped in by helicopters. Sources in Muong Nhe told Compass today that several thousand Hmong who had initially gathered to wait for the ushering in of a new Hmong kingdom had been sent or taken back to their home areas, but that some 3,000 remained. A source said that about 50 Hmong followers, including the purported "messiah" and another top leader, fled into the forest but were captured by the military. The two leaders were said to have been severely beaten by the military. One Compass source said that no one had been killed in the military action, contrary to one published report. A Vietnam expert said government information, foreign press agency reports, and an unnamed diplomat quoted in an Agence France-Presse report on events in Muong Nhe district contain information that wrongly impugns the entire large Hmong Christian movement.

Government proposes further legal restrictions on religion

Independent Catholic News (22.05.2011) / HRWF (30.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hano, Vietnam - The Vietnamese government is proposing to introduce amendments to existing laws which will further restrict freedom of worship and all other church-related activities in the country.

Cardinal Jean Baptise Pham Minh Man, of the Archdiocese of Saigon said in a letter to the Vietnamese prime minister: "Overall, the fifth draft amendments for the Government

Decree 22/2005 is a huge retrograde step compared to the original one, the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions, and the Constitution."

The letter, published on VietCatholic News on May 20, was issued after the prelate had held a conference with representatives from all dioceses in the Ecclesiastical Province of Saigon on the draft bill.

Cardinal Man said: "Essentially, the proposed amendments of the decree reflect the desire of the government to re-establish the mechanism of Asking and Granting in religious activities. The Asking and Granting process turns the legitimate rights of citizens into privileges in the hands of government officials who would grant or withheld them to people through bureaucratic procedures."

"The mechanism of Asking and Granting, hence, does not only eliminate the freedom rights of people, but also turns a 'government of people by people and for people' in to a 'Master of the country' who holds in his hands all the rights, and grants or withholds them to people at his random mood swings," he warned.

Bishops in Vietnam have repeatedly voiced their concerns that religious freedom in Vietnam is still very far from reality due to a 'jungle of law' - full of ambiguities and contradictions - which are there to regulate, circumscribe, and hence control religious communities.

Article 70 of the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam provides that "the citizen shall enjoy freedom of belief and religion; he can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law. The places of worship of all faiths and religions are protected by the law. No one can violate freedom of belief and of religion, nor can anyone misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law, and State policies."

The phrase 'misuse of beliefs and religions' is indeterminate and susceptible of many interpretations. In fact, ordinary religious functions, such as the Catholic engagement in social justice and advocacy for human rights, have had every chance to be regarded as a 'misuse of beliefs and religions' under the Article.

Fr Peter Hansen, lecturer on history of the Church in Asia at the Australian Catholic Theological College in Melbourne, said: "Certainly, the Article provides no criteria as to what is considered a 'misuse', nor does it state who is to be the arbiter of whether a particular activity falls within the definition. Arguably, it was the constitutional drafters' intent that the determinative power rest with the Vietnamese state, with the Church itself having no role to play. This potentially grants to the state the effective capacity to circumscribe what constitutes legitimate religious activity, and axiomatically, to place outside the bounds of legitimacy whatever it finds displeasing."

Moreover, quasi-legislative provisions found in a series of ordinances, and decrees on Beliefs and Religions, typically the Government Decree 22/2005 promulgated on March 1, 2005, Government Decree 26/1999, issued on 19 April 1999 which is based on a directive of the Communist Party (No.37 CT/TW), circulated on 2 July 1998, have further ramifications for the practice of religion and citizens' religious rights. Many of these provisions have drawn criticism as constituting a de facto impediment to true religious freedom.

Fundamentally, these quasi-legislative provisions state that all religions and religious denominations must seek the recognition of the central government in order to operate legally.

But, "the state only recognises the existence of religions not their legal status and their clergy's legal rights. Religious clergy, therefore, are neither entitled to citizen's rights as others nor able to legally represent their religion. Religious organisations are not entitled to a legal status as other social groups according to the Constitution and the law... Instead of being able to enjoy their legitimate rights, they have to beg for permission to held religious ceremonies, to preach their beliefs, to carry out formation and ordination," lamented the Cardinal.

Indeed, the attached minute of the conference, signed by Fr. Joseph Maria Le Quoc Thanh, the president of the newly born Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission, showed the forum participants' frustration that religious activities including liturgies, prayers services, sermons, catechetical teachings must be licensed annually or given specific permission per event whilst admission into monastic life must conform to the stipulations of the State Religious Affairs Committee. Retreats and 'similar religious activities' must be in accordance with government regulations; religious conferences must have state approval. The printing, publication, and the importation of publications, especially 'religious cultural articles', are regulated by the state.

Given its particular connection to the Vatican and the universal Catholic Church in general, the provisions regulating foreign religious involvement are of particular importance to the Vietnamese Catholic Church. Vietnam government requires that the bestowal of religious titles (bishop, cardinal, in particular) must have its approval, thus providing a de facto government veto over episcopal appointments. It has on many occasions in the past exercised that veto in rejecting candidates proposed by the Vatican.

The draft bill maintains that religious organisations' international activities must comply with state policies and precepts, and such organisations must advise the Religious Affairs Committee of any instructions received from 'foreign religious organisations', and then comply with any instructions issued by the committee. Invitations to 'foreign religious organisations and individuals' must be approved by the Committee for Religious Affairs. Foreigners wishing to undertake religious activities in Vietnam must register with local People's Committees, and any aid received from foreign religious organisations must be approved by the State Religious Affairs Committee.

The Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions promulgated on June 18, 2004 states that "legitimate properties of all faiths and religions are protected by the law". However, "in reality, there has been no single legal document stipulating clearly how they are protected and how the ownership rights of religious communities are protected," the prelate challenged. "That's why a series of premises and land has been unjustly seized," he added. Echoing the viewpoints of Vietnamese bishops in their statement on Sep. 25, 2008, the Cardinal stated that the land and property laws are out-dated and inconsistent, they ought to be revised. Vietnamese government needs to take the right to own private property into consideration as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others." and "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property."

In brief, the fifth draft amendments for the Government Decree 22/2005, as criticised by Cardinal Jean Baptise Pham, whilst maintaining all harsh previous restrictions on religious freedom, requires more administrative procedures of 'request for permission'.

The Cardinal concluded his letter by asserting that the Vietnamese Catholic community "earnestly want to see the construction of a legal system that is progressing for the advancement of the people, by the people in order for the country to develop with stability" He cautiously reminded Vietnam government that "By the same token, for the law to be respected, it requires one's courage to change their mind-set, to respect the

objective truth, and change from the fundamentals of the rule of law, rather than just the regulations or the decrees".

Vietnamese authorities in Hanoi thwart Easter celebrations

Compass Direct News (18.04.2011) / HRWF (19.04.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hanoi, Vietnam - Authorities in Vietnam prevented much-anticipated public Easter celebrations in Hanoi planned for Friday and Saturday (April 15-16) after giving a verbal promise to organizers that the events would proceed.

An interchurch organizing committee had submitted a request for permission well in advance and had made elaborate preparations for the special events featuring renowned evangelist Luis Palau.

The organizers said they were disappointed but not entirely surprised by the Communist government's action.

"The authorities have clearly demonstrated to the world what we experience regularly – that their promises, whether verbal or written, cannot be trusted," said one church leader who requested anonymity.

Asked to speculate on the reasons for the government's ultimate refusal, another key church leader said, "I don't know why, but it almost seems as if the government is deliberately damaging its own reputation."

Shortly after 1 p.m. on Friday (April 15), after long negotiations, authorities gave verbal assent for the events to proceed, promising the required written permission would be issued imminently. The government-approved venue was the Dien Kinh My Dinh Sports Complex, a state-of-the-art indoor track and field stadium in Hanoi's Tu Liem district. It reportedly holds 3,100 people; organizers had requested a place with considerably larger capacity.

After receiving the verbal promise, organizers said they went directly to the sports complex hoping to begin preparing the sound and lighting systems. They were not given access.

When no written permission was forthcoming by the scheduled start at 7 p.m., organizers said they were forced to turn away many hundreds of people arriving from the provinces by chartered buses. They urged the people to return home quietly and to pray for the event scheduled for the next evening, they said.

Very late Friday evening, the organizing committee received written permission from the Hanoi People's Committee to hold what was to have been the second night of the event on Saturday (April 16). They immediately posted the document on Vietnam's most popular Christian website www.hoithanh.com, they said.

Apparently, however, public security and city authorities quietly overrode the reluctant permission granted by Vietnam's religion bureaucracy. Organizers told Compass that even with the official letter from the People's Committee, several hurdles had remained. They had still needed to secure a contract from the sports complex on Saturday morning

for use of the facilities, and they had yet to request the Committee for Religious Affairs for permission for Palau to speak.

Early on Saturday, Pastor Nguyen Huu Mac, president of the registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), or ECVN(N), who had signed the request, went with colleagues from unregistered house churches to the sports complex to pursue the contract. When they were told that Saturday was not a work day, they went to the Tu Liem district office.

There they were stalled for several more hours by fruitless discussion. District officials eventually told them that although the sports complex was in their area of the city, it was owned and managed by another entity over which they had no control.

Finally, at 1 p.m., the manager of the sports complex arrived. He proceeded to give the organizing committee what Christian leaders described as unreasonable conditions for a contract. For instance, the manager said they could not enter the complex to prepare until 4:30 p.m. – hardly enough time for the scheduled 7 p.m. start. Organizers said he further told them that the sports complex would retain control over who and how many entered the building; he said they would not honor the tickets/invitations that had been widely distributed by the event organizers but would distribute their own and count every head.

The organizers sensed trouble.

Faced with such government duplicity and control over their event and without enough time to set up properly, church leaders said, they unanimously decided they could not proceed with integrity. Shortly after 4 p.m., they issued an indefinite postponement notice.

Reached by Compass late Saturday Hanoi time, a Luis Palau Association spokesman reported that the evangelist had just spent significant time encouraging the tired organizers. Palau told them that the Lord would bless them for their diligence and predicted that they would soon reap a great spiritual harvest. In a few years, he said, they would look on the disappointments of this weekend as insignificant, according to the spokesman.

Despite their disappointment, church leaders took note of gains: The effort to stage the events, they said, marked unprecedented cooperation among various groups, with the ECVN(N), the only registered church based in the north, applying for the permission document on behalf of all groups. Cooperating in the organizing were northern house churches belonging to the Hanoi Christian Fellowship and southern-based house churches belonging to the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, as well as some smaller groups.

Together, the church leaders said, they determined not to bow to government manipulation and pressure.

“Clearly someone at the top disallowed these events and then left it to clumsy underlings to create bureaucratic obstacles,” said a long-time overseas Vietnam analyst. “Most people will see through this ruse and recognize simple lack of religious freedom.”

In Ho Chi Minh City, similar Easter celebrations were given last-minute approval and went ahead the previous weekend with considerable response to Palau’s messages.

It is not known if or how the cancellation of the events in Hanoi will affect plans for the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, both the northern and southern entities, to include Palau in their June centennial celebrations in Danang, Hanoi, and Ho Chi Minh City.

Permission has been long requested, but so far the government has only given general verbal approval.
