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Christians threatened with eviction orders unless they recant

Christian converts in Savannakhet Province in Laos are facing eviction from their village if they refuse to renounce their Christian beliefs, according to reports from the human rights organisation Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

CSW (25.09.2013) - At a village meeting on 21 September, the Huay Village authorities in Atsaphangthong District ruled that the converts to Protestant Christianity must recant or face expulsion. The authorities accused the Christians of conducting corporate worship in their homes. The Christian villagers have rejected the order, claiming that their right to freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed under Laos' constitution.

Last month, a group of fifty Christian converts in Borikan (sometimes known as Bolikanh) District, Bolikhamsai Province were given a similar ultimatum. HRWLRF reports that the Nongdaeng Village authorities summoned representatives of the eleven families to an official meeting on 30 August, where the authorities ordered them to reconvert to their "traditional" (animist) religion. The village authorities accused the families of believing in the religion of a "foreign Western power" destructive to the Lao nation.

Information received by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) indicates that this is a common charge levelled at Christian converts. The Christians were given three days to abide by the order but they refused, insisting that Laos' constitution protects their right to freedom of religion or belief.

CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Sadly, the forced eviction of Christians in Laos is not a new problem. However, these cases suggest that Christians in the country are increasingly aware of their rights under the constitution, and are beginning to evoke these rights in clashes with the authorities. As a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Laos has an obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief. We call on the government to uphold this right and protect religious minorities from violations by both state and non-state actors".

Three pastors released from prison following arrest for spreading Christian religion

CSW (08.04.2013) - Three Lao Christian pastors arrested on 5 February on charges of "spreading the Christian religion", related to reproducing a DVD of a Christian film, have been released from prison, with the last among them freed in mid-March. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) can now confirm that all three pastors have returned to their homes and families.

Pastors Bounma, Somkaew and Bounmee were arrested on 5 February 2013 by the Phin District police in Savannakhet province after a police officer saw them copying and watching a DVD about the 'End Times' in a copy shop in Phin District market.

During their interrogation, the pastors claimed that the three copies were for their own use, but the authorities insisted that they were "spreading the Christian religion" through the film. The shop keeper and one of the pastors were released soon after their arrest.

The other two pastors were detained at Phin district prison. In early March, CSW received reports that they were being held in a high security section of the prison, reserved for those prisoners who have committed the most severe crimes. Conditions in this part of the prison are particularly restrictive: prisoners' legs are chained together and inmates are not allowed to leave the room, even to defecate. Pastor Bounma was reportedly kicked and beaten severely by the arresting police lieutenant whilst in detention in an attempt to force him to confess.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW welcomes the release of pastors Bounma, Somkaew and Bounmee in Laos. However, we remain deeply concerned about the false allegations against the three men and about the use of torture to extract a confession. We urge the Lao authorities to protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and to ensure that detainees are not subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, in line with the Lao government's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

Laos police arrested and detained Christian pastors for spreading Christian religion through movie CDs

Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (07.02.2013) - The Phin district police of Savannakhet province of Laos arrested and detained three Christian pastors for disseminating Christian religion. The incident took place approximately 5:00 p.m. on February 5, 2013, when three Christian pastors took a copy of a movie CD about the End Times to a local shop for making copies. The shop is located in the Phin district market.

After three copies were made, the owner of the shop, along with the three pastors, tested one of the CDs and continued watching it until the end. While they were testing the movie CD, a police came by the shop and saw them viewing it. (Copies of this same movie CD are found in other shops located in other districts in Savannakhet province.) The police thus contacted his superior Police Lieutenant Khamvee who was in charge of criminal cases at the Phin district of Savannakhet province.

Afterward, the Police Lieutenant Khamvee accompanied by his two deputies stormed the shop and arrested the three pastors. The shop owner was also taken to the police station for further questioning but he was later released. However, the three pastors are being detained arbitrarily in the Phin district prison. The pastors responded to the police interrogation that they had three copies made so that they could each view it in their own homes, but the authorities insisted that they were spreading the Christian religion that is being portrayed in the movie.

The names and church affiliation of the three pastors are as follows:

1. Mr. Bounma, pastor of Alowmai Village Church, Phin district, Savannakhet province
2. Mr. Somkaew, pastor of Kengsainoi Village Church, Phin district, Savannakhet province
3. Mr. Bounmee, pastor of Savet Village Church, Sepon district, Savannakhet province

The HRWLRF is calling on the Lao government to release the three Lao pastors who are being held in prison arbitrarily for spreading the Christian religion. In addition, the HRWLRF is urging the Lao government to punish the Phin district's Police Lieutenant Khamvee and his two deputies for abusing power causing Christians to suffer injustice.

Police arrest three pastors on charges of spreading the Christian religion

CSW (08.02.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that three Christian pastors in Laos have been arrested and detained for "spreading the Christian religion" by reproducing a DVD of a Christian film. Pastor Bounma of Alowmai Village Church, Pastor Somkaew of Kengsainoi Village Church and Pastor Bounmee of Savet Village Church, were arrested on 5 February 2013 by the Phin District police in Savannakhet province.

According to CSW's sources, the pastors took a DVD copy of a film about the 'End Times' to a shop in Phin District market in order to make three copies. After the copies were made, the owner of the shop, along with the three pastors, tested one of the DVDs and watched the film through to the end. While they were watching, a police officer came to the shop and saw the shop owner and the pastors watching the film. The police officer then contacted his superior, Lieutenant Khamvee, who came to the shop accompanied by two deputies. The police arrested the three pastors and took the shop owner to the police station for further questioning. The shop owner was later released without charge.

During their interrogation, the pastors claimed that the three copies were for their own use, but the authorities insisted that they were "spreading the Christian religion" through the film. The three pastors are currently being detained in Phin district prison.

Although Article 30 of the 1991 Lao Constitution guarantees citizens the right to "believe or not to believe in religions", the 2002 "Decree Regarding Governance and Protection of Religious Activity in the Lao PDR" (Prime Minister's Decree No. 92/PM) places significant restrictions on the activities of religious believers. Article 14 of the Decree states that the printing of books, documents for dissemination, signs and various plates related to religion must be authorised by the Ministry of Information and Culture with the approval of the Central Committee of the Lao Front for National Construction. It goes on to say, "It is forbidden for believers in the Lao PDR to publish or possess books, documents, photographs, signs, video cassettes, VCD, films or other media having characteristics of superstitions...or distortions of truth". In this case, the film in question can be found in other shops in Savannakhet province, which suggests that either the film has been

approved by the authorities, or that the local authorities have turned a blind eye to the sale of the film in other areas.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is deeply concerned about these arrests, which highlight the restrictions placed on the reproduction and dissemination of religious materials. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Laos in 2009, protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the public manifestation of religion and the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds in any media. We urge the Lao authorities to release the three men immediately and to lift restrictions on the reproduction and dissemination of religious materials, in line with its obligations under the ICCPR."
