

Persecution of Hmong Christians and the Muong Nhe Incident

A Report Compiled from Direct Interviews with Victims and Witnesses
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In early May 2011, Vietnamese military troops attacked thousands of Hmong who gathered near Huoi Khon Village in the Muong Nhe District, Dien Bien Province (North Vietnam) to call for a stop to government confiscation of their land and for religious freedom. Reportedly scores were killed and many more injured. The government of Vietnam has effectively blocked access to the area to outsiders and news from the area from getting out. Hundreds of protestors, fearing police brutality and imprisonment, hid in the jungle. After months of hiding and trekking by land, a small number of these Hmong have arrived in Thailand. BPSOS has conducted interviews with many of them to reconstruct what had happened.

According to Vietnam's 2009 national census, there were slightly over a million Hmong living in Vietnam, mostly in the country's Northwest Mountainous region. In recent decades an increasing number of Hmong have converted to Christianity. The Vietnamese government has made it a national priority to stem the spread of Christianity in the region.

While the Prime Minister's Directive 01/2005/CT-TTg, "Special Instructions Regarding Protestantism," ostensibly declares the end of forced renunciation, in reality the authorities simply call that by a different name: "encouraging the return to traditional beliefs" as stated in the 2007 revision of the Central Bureau of Religious Affairs' "Training Document: Concerning the Task of the Protestant Religion in the Northern Mountainous Region." In another leaked document issued in 2007 (TL2007), the Central Bureau of Religious Affairs called for "resolutely overcom[ing] the abnormal and spontaneous growth of Protestantism" and "propagandiz[ing] and mobiliz[ing] the people to safeguard and promote good traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities" (page 32, TL2007).

The governments of the three Northern provinces Son La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien have been the most aggressive in carrying out this national policy. According to Father Nguyen Van Khai, a Redemptorist who did missionary work in those provinces, there is no Catholic or Protestant church permitted to function. From time to time, Catholic and Protestant clergy members from outside have visited Hmong villages in these provinces to conduct prayers, baptism, and other religious activities, but they must do so secretly, disguised as common people and coming and going under the cover of night.



Father Nguyen Van Khai conducting a secret mass for Hmong Catholics in a Northern province, March 24, 2010.

According to Father Khai, for many Hmong Catholics he was the first Catholic priest they had ever met in their lives.

In 2006, BPSOS publicized a list of 671 Hmong Protestant house churches that had attempted, since 2005 to register for religious activities according to Vietnam's Ordinance on Belief and Religion, promulgated on November 15, 2004, and the Decree on Implementing the Ordinance on Belief and Religion (22/2005/ND-CP) issued March 1, 2005. Article IV, Provision 20 of the decree specifies that affiliates of religious organizations with national legal recognition need not register their activities; they only need to notify their respective local People's Committees of their planned religious activities before October 15 of each year. If the local People's Committees do not object in writing, they may officially conduct their religious activities. The said Hmong house churches are all affiliated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN-North), which has national legal recognition status. However, when they followed this decree, the local authorities required that these house churches must go through the registration process for unaffiliated religious organizations. So they went through the process. As far as we could verify, only 34 registration applications were approved, and only for one year. In April 2007, the government indefinitely suspended its consideration of registration applications submitted by these Hmong house churches.

At the US-Vietnam human rights dialogue held in Washington DC in November 2009, when presented with the said list, the Vietnamese delegation promised to give its review and resolution high priority. Nothing happened. Thirteen months later, the government sent troops in to raze flat an entire village (Xa Na Khua) whose residents had all been converted to Protestantism, which prompted a mass demonstration in early May 2011. The government sent in troops and the police mobile unit to brutally and fatally crackdown on the demonstrators.

From missionaries and asylum seekers, we have obtained first-hand reports of the following measures used by the government to target Hmong Christians:

- Arrests and detention of men, resulting in Hmong villages with few male adults

- Public transportation denied to Hmong Christians so as to block them from attending mass in near-by towns
- Prohibiting clergy members from visiting Hmong villages
- Confiscation of farm land
- Destruction of homes
- Forced renunciation of their faith
- Forced abortion

Some Hmong had to leave their villages and migrate to other areas, including in the South. Even so, they continue to be targeted by the local authorities with arbitrary confiscation of farm land, disruption of religious services, forced renunciation, and different forms of discrimination.

Despite the government's many attempts to curb it, Christianity continues to spread rapidly among the Hmong and other ethnic minorities living in Vietnam's mountainous regions. According to BBC, Vietnamese language programming, on April 5, 2011, the border patrol forces reported on its website (bienphong.cm.vn) that the Vàng Chử (God) religion (Christianity) was spreading rapidly in border regions of Dien Bien.

The mass demonstration of May 2011 in Muong Nhe District, Dien Bien Province

On January 28, 2011, the government sent military troops with order to raze all the homes and take over all the farm land in the Hmong village of Xa Na Khoa, Ban Nam Nhu, Huyen Muong Nhe, Dien Bien Province. Listed among the 671 Hmong Protestant churches that have tried to register, mostly unsuccessfully, for government approval of their religious activities, the village is home to over a hundred households, all Protestant. The authorities told the villagers that Protestantism was an American religion and since they refused to renounce their faith, they had no place in Vietnam: "You should go to America to till America's land and follow America's religion." The government sent workers in to bring down the homes, starting with those at the entrance of the village. They suspended work after having demolished 13 homes.

After the Lunar New Year, on March 15 they came back to finish their job. Villagers who took pictures of the demolition of their homes were arrested. The villagers asked the authorities on site, "where do we go now?" and were told "wherever but not here."



Troops ready to enforce government order to raze the entire Hmong village of Xa Na Khua, Jan 28, 2011.



Government workers demolishing homes in Xa Na Khua.



What's left of the Hmong villagers' homes.

The villagers decided to demonstrate against the demolition of their homes. Words got out to Hmong communities in other provinces, who were also targeted by the government's policy of persecution against Hmong Christians. On May 1, 2011 thousands, including men, women and children, gathered in a location near Huoi Khon Village in Muong Nhe District, some coming from as far as Dak Lak and Binh Phuoc in the South. On May 2, the local government and police arrived and asked for the reasons of the demonstrations. The demonstrators explained that they wanted to petition for the freedom to practice their faith and a stop to the confiscation of their farm land and their homes. The authorities told the demonstrators that their petitions would be duly considered and would be communicated directly to each petitioner. For that purpose, the authorities asked for the ID paper of each demonstrator. Sometimes they kept the original documents and some other times they took pictures and returned the originals.

On May 3, hundreds of troops from the military and the mobile (anti-riot) police encircled the demonstrators. On May 4, a helicopter flew over the demonstrators, beaming a statement from Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung ordering the demonstrators to disband and go home. It was soon followed by a second helicopter that dropped certain liquid on the demonstrators.

On May 5, the mobile police and military troops continued to encircle the demonstrators. One Hmong woman was reportedly died of police beating. The next day, May 6, the troops launched an all-out assault against the demonstrators, using batons and electric rods. According to eye-witnesses, scores were killed. We have compiled a partial list of people killed with confirmation from their relatives or eye-witnesses.



Thousands of Hmong demonstrators demanding end of land confiscation and religious persecution.



Troops readying to move in, with batons and electric rods in hand.



Troops encircling the demonstrators.

The government arrested many demonstrators and took them into custody. Those who escaped arrest were tracked down in the following months by the police who now have their residential address. Reportedly hundreds of demonstrators hid themselves in the jungle. Many have since been captured while a number successfully made it to Thailand after months of trekking through Laos.



Demonstrators, including women and children, trying to escape the brutal assault by the mobile police and military.

A witness who is now in Thailand has reported that the police shot at him with live ammunition as he ran away from his hiding place. We have received report that Sanh No Vang, a resident of Thon Mong Phong, Xa Cu Pui, Huyen Kala Bong, Dak Lak Province who participated in the May demonstration, saw police members approaching his hiding place. He ran away and was shot dead by the police on December 12, 2011. We have compiled a partial list of Hmong arrested and detained with confirmation from their relatives or eye-witnesses.



Sanh No Vang was shot dead as he tried to escape from being captured by the police, 12/12/2011.

The government-controlled media claimed that the villagers in one village captured and held police members captive. A witness that we talked to described this as pure fabrication. In fact, on that day the district police imposed a 9pm curfew to block the villagers from leaving the village and joining the demonstration. At around 11pm several members of the village police walked into the village in civilian clothes, they were arrested by the district police and taken away. The government then twisted the facts and placed the blame on the villagers who could not have left their homes due to the curfew.

Documentary videos and photos of the crackdown available at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_gleadjG7c&feature=g-upl&context=G2fdc004AUAAAAAAAAAAAA

Partial List of Hmong Christians killed at the May 2011 Demonstration

- 1) Thao A Phu (Born 1982)
- 2) Thao A Hau
- 3) Giang Thi Sau (April 12, 1985)
- 4) Ham Ca Ri
- 5) Sung Seo Chua (June 15, 1979)
- 6) Giang Thi Xua
- 7) Giang Din Cong
- 8) Cu Seo Phong (Sep 1975)
- 9) Giang Pao Cha (Nov 1964)
- 10) Vang Thi Sau
- 11) Thao Seo Lu
- 12) Thao Seo Phu (1989)
- 13) Pang
- 14) Cu A Pao (July 15, 1980)

Partial List of Hmong Christians in Detention in the Aftermath of the May 2011 Demonstration

- 1) Vang A Thang
- 2) Giuong Van Dau
- 3) Cu A Pao (1980)
- 4) Vang Seo Phu (1978)
- 5) Thao Seo Luu (1983)
- 6) Thao Dung Khai (Xa Na Bung, Muong Nhe)
- 7) Trang Nha Cho
- 8) Cu Seo Vang
- 9) Sung Seo Hoa (1992)
- 10) Sung A Tua (1984)
- 11) Giang Seo Si (1979)
- 12) Vang Seo Thang (1985)
- 13) Giang A Sung (Xa Na Bung, Muong Nhe)
- 14) Ho Sai Hua (Ban La San, Moong, Tong, Muong Nhe)
- 15) Chang Bang Se (Ban Chuyen Gia, Nom Ke, Muong Nhe)
- 16) Sung Seo Vang
- 17) Ly Seo Du (1962)
- 18) Ly Seo Vang (1981)
- 19) Ly Seo De (1986)
- 20) Giang A Vang
- 21) Giang A Hu

For further reading:

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/17/vietnam-investigate-crackdown-hmong-unrest>

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-12/vietnam-detains-protesters-following-ethnic-hmong-border-unrest.html>

http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=4197