

Protestant, Lutheran

In an attempt to stop the harassment of their members and the infiltration of their services by the government, the Vietnam-U.S. Lutheran Alliance Church (VN-US LAC) applied to register as a religious organisation. In May 2010, 12 representatives met with the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA). At the meeting, a GCRA official informed the representatives that new religious groups must operate for at least 20 years and be “positively regarded by the government” before they can register, and must then undergo a 2-year probation period.

According to one church member, the meeting seemed ‘normal’ and there was no indication of the events which were to follow.

However, a month later, those who had attended the meeting were summoned to a “working session” (interrogation). Other pastors in the Southwest and Central provinces told the central leaders that their local public security officers had labelled the Lutheran Christians as “reactionary elements” who conspired to “agitate against the government”. The Lutheran leaders believe GCRA had provided the identity of local pastors using the information submitted for the application.

Arrest of Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh

On 28 April 2011, public security officers surrounded the home of Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, Director of the VN-US LAC Executive Committee, in Gia Lai, searched his house, and put him in detention.

During his investigation, Pastor Chinh was placed in solitary confinement for 7 months and was not allowed family visits during this period. On 26 March 2012, Pastor Chinh was tried by Gia Lai Lower Court. His family was not notified of the trial, and there was no lawyer present to represent Pastor Chinh. Two days before the trial, public security officers warned other Lutheran pastors not to attend the trial. He was sentenced to 11 years for “sowing division between the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and its people by using his influence as a pastor”.

Pastor Chinh’s wife, Tran Thi Hong, believes other inmates have been instructed to harass, threaten and beat him in prison. On one visit in October 2013, his wife learned that a prisoner apparently working for the government had beaten Pastor Chinh, leaving large bruises on his face, and that the prisoner had been ordered to try and murder him. She notified the prison guards, who ignored her.

Harassment and restrictions

Since Pastor Chinh was sentenced to 11 years in prison, the Lutheran church has been harassed at both the central and local levels. Leaders have been questioned and instructed to dissolve the church. Requests to hold Christmas celebrations have been rejected, and some groups have been warned that if they go ahead with such celebrations, they will be physically attacked.

Some Lutheran Christians also report being pressured to recant, and threatened with beatings and the confiscation of household registration documents and identification. Others report that officials from different levels of government have conducted a door-to-door campaign telling people that the Lutherans were guilty of ‘disrupting public order’.

References

Vietnam Government’s Persecution of the Vietnam-U.S. Lutheran Alliance Church, July 25, 2014

Persecution against Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and the Vietnam-U.S. Lutheran Alliance Church, May 16, 2014

CSW interviews, 2013 (not available)