

# **VIETNAM GOVERNMENT'S PERSECUTION OF THE VIETNAM-U.S. LUTHERAN ALLIANCE CHURCH**

## **1/ Persecution during the Church's Initial Years**

- In 2006 – 2007, Communist security forces employed devious tactics in carrying out a devastating assault on the Vietnam Multi-Ethnic Alliance Church in Christ. Government infiltrators weakened the Church as they sowed division within her. Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh was the Church's Director at the time and I was concurrently a member of the executive committee and the Multi-Ethnic Evangelical Communications Director. Along with a number of other church members, we split out in an attempt to find a way to save the Church so that she can continue her pastoral mission as God had willed.

- Answering our prayers, the Lord caused Bishop Tran Thanh Van to become the head of the U.S. Lutheran Church. With his support, we reorganized our Church under a new name, Vietnam-U.S. Lutheran Alliance Church. In early 2009 the new Church formerly began to operate with an interim management board consisting of 52 pastors. We elected an executive committee in charge of the Church's operation, consisting of 7 pastors with the following responsibilities: a director, 3 deputy directors, a secretary, a budget director, and a pastoral affairs coordinator. As the elected secretary, I have been assisted by a deputy secretary. Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh was elected to the Church's director position.

- We consulted with Bishop Tran Thanh Van, the director of the Vietnam-U.S. Alliance Church, who supported our decision to register with the government of Vietnam, a move aimed at stopping the government's harassment and persecution and reducing its public security organs' devious attacks. Emulating several other evangelical churches, we would meet with members of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) and submit our registration application in accordance with the Prime Minister's Directive 01/2005/CT-TTg on Works for Protestantism. In May 2010, we formed a delegation of 12 pastors representing our Church at meetings with GCRA in Hanoi.

\* GCRA officials who met with our delegation included Messrs. Nguyen Thanh Xuan – GCRA Vice Chair, Nguyen Van Thong, Protestantism Affairs Chief, and two officials in civilian clothes whom we recognized as security officers of the Public Security Ministry. Mr. Xuan stated

that new religious groups must operate for at least 20 years and be positively regarded by the government before they may seek to register, and after receiving official approval, they must remain on probation for two years before the government recognizes them as legal entities. Mr. Xuan also said that the government could allow a shorter timeline if we operated in a satisfactory manner at the local level. We returned to our churches and continued our work. A month after the GCRA meeting, pastors from Southwestern and Central provinces urgently notified us that their local public security offices had made them come to their facilities for meetings in which public security employees said negative things about our leadership, including labeling us as reactionary elements who conspired with Bishop Tran Thanh Van to agitate against the government.

We realized that GCRA had provided the identity of local pastors (from our registration application material) to local public security offices, enabling those to carry out the Public Security Ministry's campaign of sabotage and intimidation with our local pastors as their targets. Still, we continued to pray and guide our congregations. Our position was: we had shown goodwill to the government and followed the written law, and yet the government continued its insidious campaign; therefore we could only maintain the course, i.e., conduct Church activities consistent with our faith in the Lord and living as He had taught us through the Bible: "Worship God and love others".

- In November 2010, charitable American groups and individuals donated to the Church funds for the relief of flood victims in the Central provinces, a gesture of empathy for those who had suffered great losses. During the 10 days that we traveled to the various flooded areas on that humanitarian mission, public security employees tried non-stop to hamper our work as if bad weather had not posed enough of a difficulty. However, with the Lord's help, we managed to distribute directly to victims the total sum of 200 millions in Vietnamese currency.

10 days after the Church completed the humanitarian operation, the newspaper of the Ho Chi Minh City's public security department carried an article claiming that our humanitarian operation's real agenda was to contact gullible citizens in an effort to rally them to our "anti-government" activities.

## **2/ Persecution after Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh's Arrest**

- On April 28, 2011, public security in Gia Lai Province asked Pastor Chinh to interrupt his business trip in Saigon and return to his hometown, Pleiku (in Gia Lai) to sign a request for temporary stay in Saigon. When he returned home, public security surrounded his house, put manacles on him, read the arrest warrant, and conducted a thorough search of his house. They took him into detention in a covered vehicle. Shortly thereafter, they announced their prosecution of Pastor Chinh under the law article “sabotaging the solidarity policy, sowing division between citizens and the government”. During their investigation, public security committed grave violations of the law as follows:

\* Placed Pastor Chinh in solitary confinement during 7 months, not allowing his wife and child to see him. Continued to detain him for 20 months after completing their investigation. On March 26, 2012, the Gia Lai Lower Court tried him without allowing an attorney to represent him, without notifying his family of the trial. His wife, Tran Thi Hong, only learned of the trial date from a family member of another prisoner. Two days before the trial, public security officers warned all the pastors (including me) on the executive committee that they did not allow any of us to attend the trial or bring congregation members to the court house, threatening us with severe punishment under the law.

\* Pastor Chinh has been in prison for 3 years without receiving formal sentence in writing and a report on the results of the government’s investigation (as required under Vietnam’s law governing prosecution and court decisions). In prison, the government used hardened criminals as its surrogates in harassing, threatening, and beating Pastor Chinh. The most recent instance was: when Mrs. Hong visited her husband on October 15, 2013, she learned that a prisoner working for the government had beaten Pastor Chinh, leaving large bruises on his face, and that the aggressor had been ordered to try and murder him. She notified prison guards who ignored her plea. On May 17, 2014, after the pastor and some other prisoners protested against the prison’s treatment of targeted victims, public security officers in An Phuoc Prison (Phu Giao District, Binh Duong Province), held a public denunciation of Pastor Chinh in the presence of the other prisoners.

### **3/ Continuing Persecution of Church Members**

- Soon after Pastor Chinh’s arrest (during the investigation period), Colonel Nguyen Van Trach, deputy director of the investigative unit of the public security department in Gia Lai came to

work with the public security department in Tra Vinh Province. They issued a request for me to meet with them on Pastor Chinh's "violations". On August 1, 2011, they met with me during 5 hours. Colonel Trach and Investigator Tran Viet Dung of Gia Lai public security, and Lieutenant Colonel Tran Van Manh, leader of their PA 38 Unit and a major (no name displayed on his uniform) of Tra Vinh public security observed my session with investigators from the Gia Lai department. They presented "evidence" against Pastor Chinh and asked me about each instance, why I claimed that I had not known about that although I had access to Pastor Chinh in my capacity as the Church's secretary. My reply was that I had been busy with my pastoral duties and was not a public security investigator who should be concerned with non-religious issues. After seeing that I was unfazed, they asked me to sign a declaration to the effect that, as a Church leader, I would not engage in activities detrimental the national security.

\* On May 17, 2011, Cang Long District (where I live) public security asked me to meet with them on certain matters. At their offices, I saw Lieutenant Colonel Dao Van Nhieu (Tra Vinh public security's political affairs), Lieutenant Colonel Tran Van Manh, and 2 young officers with cameras that they used to record our session. Can Long District public security was represented by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Van Trai, security chief for the district. After citing "evidence" of Pastor Chinh's agitation against the government, they requested me, as the secretary and acting Church director, to order all our churches and affiliated organizations to cease operation until the Public Security Ministry and GCRA issued a decision. I pointed to the government's stated policy of respecting religious freedom and its responsibility to uphold that right. I said that no church member had done anything against the law and whatever Pastor Chinh had done, it was his own actions, not the Church's. They let me go after my response.

In summary, after the court sentenced Pastor Chinh to 11 years in prison, the government has been using its decision against him to harass and restrict our Church's activities at both the central and local levels. Public security forbids all prayer houses from holding prayer sessions and any other activity, even if the activity is purely religious.

In the past 2 years we've had to practice our religion in hiding and fear.

\* At the end of May 2013, the Public Security Ministry sent 4 officers from the First Security Directorate to Tra Vinh. The provincial security department's political affairs office sent

me a request for a meeting. They also sent a car to pick me up, to enforce their request. The location was the imports/exports building, temporarily used by the provincial public security department while that department's building was being constructed. The First Security Directorate officers quizzed me during the whole day on unsubstantiated insinuations and even searched my laptop's hard disk. After finding no incriminating evidence, they turned to my role in the establishment of the Interfaith Council of Vietnam, claiming that participants were reactionary elements operating against the government. They said that I must not belong to the Council, must dissolve our Church, and appeal to our believers to join the government-sanctioned churches under government control.

#### **4/ Forbidden from Celebrating Christmas and all Other Church Activities**

- The local government, under direction from higher levels and the Public Security Ministry, closely monitors local churches and affiliated units during the period preceding each year's Christmas. Before Christmas, the local government would call on church representatives to apply for the approval of planned Christmas activities. However, whenever we applied, the local government would not reply. When we began our Christmas celebrations, public security would invariably harass and try to stop us. From 2010 until now, we have not been able to celebrate Christmas, a worldwide Christian celebration. In our Western Provinces region, I provided guidance to pastors and missionaries responsible for local affiliations on the process for registering with their local government units to seek approval for celebrating Christmas (as other Christian Churches have been doing). However, the government denied our requests and had pastors come to meet with officials and public security officers who threatened us, claiming that the government had not recognized our Church. They warned that if we celebrated, we would be subject to physical attacks and may not expect any protection. A number of examples are discussed below:

\* On December 16, 2010, the People's Committee of Ngai Xuyen Village in Tra Cu District asked the following individuals to meet with them: Missionary Thach Sac (leader of Tra Cu Church) and Missionary Kim Thi Hoang (leader of the Ngai Xuyen congregation). At the meeting, the local officials stated that the Church may not celebrate Christmas because the government had not recognized the Church. From then on, near Christmas the government kept a close watch and suppressed any attempt to practice our religion. Over the past three years we've had to celebrate Christmas clandestinely, in fear.

\* In late July 2013, the Tra Cu Church had just rebuilt the prayer house for worship during the rainy season. That church invited me to come as the Church's representative to consecrate the structure to Christ and also offer recently born infants to Christ. Approximately 100 believers came for the planned event. Public security vehicles made passes back and forth to intimidate the faithful while traffic police set up roadblocks on opposing sections of the main street to check the IDs of those who came to the site. After I left, a week later, on August 6, 2013, the People's Committee of Ngai Xuyen Village requested Ms. Kim Thi Hoang to come to their office. Representatives of public security and several government-sanctioned groups were present. They tried to pressure her into stopping religious activities at the prayer house, including inviting Pastor Hoa to come to preach or conduct religious services. They requested her to let the government know as soon as Pastor Hoa arrives in the future.

\* On April 1, 2014, public security ordered the Patriotic Front Committee of Thanh Son Village to request Missionary Thach Trung, leader of the Thanh Son Church, to come for a meeting. They announced to Mr. Trung that he must not let believers assemble to worship, maintain contact with Pastor Hoa, or house visitors from other localities.

We request the United Nations to intervene with the government of Vietnam and ask Vietnam to: (a) show evidence of speedy reforms concerning human rights and religious freedom; (b) commit to stop its suppression of the Vietnam-U.S. Lutheran Alliance Church and other house churches that are being victimized; and, (c) free Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and all the other religious prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

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