

VIETNAM: Intimidation and violence against Catholics 2012-2013

1. Context

The 2009 government census puts the number of Catholics at 5,677,086, although some estimates put the figure at around 8 million¹. The early months of 2013 saw an improvement in relations between the Vatican and the Vietnamese Government: in January the general secretary of the Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, met with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in Rome. This was the first time a pope had met a Vietnamese Communist Party general secretary. Then in March, the Vatican envoy to Vietnam, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, was able to visit two provinces in the far north of the country, Ha Giang and Tuyen Quang, “without restriction or interference from government officials”². These developments may signal a move towards establishing normal diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Vietnam.

However, while there are positive signs of a warmer relationship between the Vatican and the central government, the situation at the local level has yet to reflect this development. 2012 saw a spate of incidents involving violence, intimidation and destruction of church property across the country. Some of the most severe or frequent abuses are described in the following section.

It is noteworthy that although some Protestant Christians believe that Catholics do not suffer religious persecution on the same scale as the Protestant Church, in fact some of the problems described by Catholic clergy and laypersons are similar to those experienced by Protestants. For example, both Catholics and Protestants report discrimination in the distribution of public services and utilities. Both groups are involved in social action and poverty alleviation, and both Catholic and Protestant leaders, as well as prominent Buddhists, have criticised the restrictions imposed on religious organisations and activities in the new “Decree No. 92/2012/ND-CP: Specific provisions and measures for the implementation of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion”, which came into effect on 1 January this year.

2. Cases

Nghe An Province

Nghe An Province is the homeland of national hero and former leader Ho Chi Minh, or “Uncle Ho”. Local religious leaders believe that officials have been ordered to discourage the growth of religious activity in the region in order to preserve its status as the birthplace of a national hero. On 11 June 2012 party officials attacked Catholics in Quy Chau District in an attempt to confiscate land owned by the church. A large group violently attacked parishioners, leaving several with serious cuts and bruises to their face and body.

Elsewhere in Nghe An, police and soldiers disrupted a Mass in Con Cuong on 3 June by making noise and cutting off the amplifier. The situation became more severe on 1 July when Reverend Nguyen Dinh Thuc was stopped by a group of thugs on his way to Mass. Parishioners rushed to help but were violently beaten by the thugs. Many were seriously injured. On the same occasion, thugs broke into a church and smashed a statue of the Virgin Mary. Two weeks later, on 17 July, parishioners

¹ Reg Reimer, *Vietnam's Christians*, William Carey Library, 2011; p. 24.

² ‘Vatican envoy allowed free access on visit’, *UCA News*, 21 March 2013, <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vatican-envoy-allowed-free-access-on-visit/67803>

from Nghia Dan district, Nghe An, discovered that 47 crosses from gravestones had been vandalised during the night.

Hanoi

In the capital city Hanoi, thugs caused serious damage to an orphanage run by Father Joseph Nguyen Van Binh. The incident occurred on 14 April 2012. During the raid, Father Nguyen Van Binh was knocked unconscious when he tried to intervene to stop the thugs beating children who refused to be carried away. Sources in Hanoi say the thugs acted with the cooperation of the police. Also in Hanoi, plainclothes police disrupted a student Christmas celebration on 22 December 2012. The adults present were required to show their identity papers. The police then told them to disband the celebration. Soon afterwards, the lights in the venue went off. One non-Catholic who attended the event described it as being very peaceful. There was nothing there which could be described as 'incitement', he said.

Kon Tum Province

In Kon Tum Province in the Central Highlands, a Catholic priest named Father Nguyen Quang Hoa was beaten by thugs on his way home from a funeral. He was struck with steel rods until he lost consciousness, and was left with dark purple bruising around his torso. This incident occurred in late February 2012. Mgr Michael Hoang Duc Oanh, Bishop of Kon Tum, later condemned the attack. According to Protestant leaders in the area, there are many thousands of Catholics in Kon Tum, as well as some Protestants. Yet both Catholics and Protestants in the province face harassment and abuse: in February and March 2013, Protestants in Tu Mo Rong District reported a decline in religious freedom as a result of violent attacks by thugs linked to the local authorities.

Gia Lai Province

On 28 May 2012, in Mang Yang District of Gia Lai Province, Catholics from the ethnic minority group Bahnar came under pressure from local authorities to dismantle the altar in the village chapel and to remove the cross from the building. The village has a special role caring for lepers. Police also entered the leper colony and demanded that the church bell tower nearby be removed.

Ho Chi Minh City

On 30 October 2012, a young Christian journalist named Anna Huyen Trang was approached by police and forced into a police car. She was taken to Cau Kho Ward police station, where she was interrogated by about ten different police officers and security personnel. The reason for her detention was not made clear. During the course of her interrogation, officers joked about stripping and raping her, and about injecting her with AIDS. A female officer strangled her and one male officer pulled her hair to raise her head. The police report accused Trang of "gathering where prohibited" and refusing to cooperate with the police³.

Land use

Prohibiting or opposing the sale of land to the church is one way in which local officials limit the growth of the church. When a church is growing and wants to buy land, the church leaders must first approach a landowner and pay them money for the land. After this, the landowner must send a letter to the government saying they do not need the land and want to give it to the government. Then the landowner must send a second letter, proposing to offer the land to the church. Next the government conducts a survey to see if the church really needs the land. The government can give

³ 'Huyen Trang telling her story of being kidnapped by the police', *Vietnamese Redemptorists' News*, 17 November 2012, <http://www.chuacuuthe.com/2012/11/17/huyen-trang-telling-her-story-of-being-kidnapped-by-the-police-on-30102012/>

the land to the church, give the church land in another location, or decide the church does not need the land and must give it back to the government, in which case, the church loses the money it paid to the landowner.

Ordination of bishops

According to two priests in Ho Chi Minh City, if the Vatican wants to appoint a bishop, they must first wait for government approval and agreement. If candidates agree to work with the government, they are allowed to progress to higher positions. This practice has given rise to the phrase 'national priest' or 'nationalist priest', referring to a priest who is working for the government.

3. Recommendations

In light of these reports of restrictions, harassment and violent assaults against Catholic clergy and parishioners, CSW makes the following recommendations to the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam:

- To immediately investigate all incidents of violations against Catholics in Vietnam, including destruction of property, physical attacks, intimidation and harassment, and ensure that those responsible are held to account;
- To ensure that victims of human rights violations are granted adequate protection from reprisals and are properly compensated;
- To conduct training sessions on the law pertaining to religious freedom for police officers, local authorities and other state employees;
- To provide regular opportunities for Catholic clergy and lay leaders to voice concerns about the treatment of Catholics in different parts of the country, and guarantee follow up investigations into these concerns;
- To remove restrictions on the movement of clergy inside the country, and allow clergy to travel overseas and to receive international visitors;
- To ensure that churches are able to purchase or rent land for lawful religious activities;
- To allow the Vatican envoy unfettered access to Catholic communities in all areas of the country;
- To acknowledge and encourage the role of Catholics and Protestants in poverty alleviation and social action, and their contribution to Vietnamese civil society.

The international community, including both state and non-state actors, is encouraged:

- To urge the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to follow the recommendations provided above;
- To continue to monitor and raise issues of religious freedom in all appropriate fora, including bilateral human rights dialogues and strategic partnership exchanges;
- To advise embassies in Vietnam to develop relationships with religious leaders and communities, especially those living and working in ethnic minority areas;
- To organise and attend meetings with human rights defenders, religious leaders, and members of religious minority communities, when it is possible to do so safely.