

**April 2013**  
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## **VIETNAM: Death in custody of Hmong Christian, Central Highlands**

### ***1. Summary***

Hoang Van Ngai (also known as Vam Ngaij Vaj<sup>1</sup>), died in police custody at Gia Nghia Town police station, Dak Nong, on 16-17 March 2013. After his death, the police claimed that an autopsy was performed confirming that the victim died after putting his hand into an electric socket. Photographs taken shortly after the death and the statements of those who saw the body at that time suggest that Ngai was beaten severely while in police custody.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide has received reports, letters of complaint and announcements about the death written the victim's family members. The information in this briefing is taken from these documents and from other reports from church and community leaders.

### ***2. Details of the case***

According to the reports cited above, Hoang Van Ngai (born 04 June 1974), was a Hmong from Bac Kan Province in the Northeast part of the country. He became a Christian in 1999 and migrated to Dak Nong Province in the Central Highlands, where he settled with his wife and four children, aged 7 to 15 years at present. At the time of his death, he was an elder of Bui Tre Church, which belongs to the legally recognised denomination, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South).

Ngai's older brother states that some government officials hated Ngai because he "strongly resisted their abuse of power" by struggling to preserve the church when the authorities forbid them to meet, and because he refused to pay bribes and wouldn't drink alcohol with the officials.

On the morning of 14 March 2013 Hoang Van Ngai, together with his brother, Hoang Van Pa, his wife, Ly Thi Song, and his sister-in-law, Ly Thi My, went to work in their fields. About 17:30 six commune police and officials from Nghia Tin village came and tried to arrest them. The men, Hoang Van Ngai and Hoang Van Pa, escaped but the two women, Ly Thi Song and Ly Thi My, were handcuffed, tied with rope and dragged to the police vehicle. They were taken to the police station in Gia Nghia and detained in the same cell.

On 15 March police arrested Hoang Van Ngai, his brother, and Sung A Tu, who previously owned the land where the two women were arrested. No clear reason was given for the arrests, although some reports claim that the police accused the two brothers of "destroying the forest". The two women were released the following day.

The two brothers were detained in adjacent cells under the authority of Deputy Police Chief Pham Duc Thinh and Chief Investigator Tung. At about 15:00 on 17 March, Ngai's brother heard the sound of violent beating coming from his brother's cell. At 16:30, a police officer looked into the cell and said, "That guy's probably dead already". When the police took Ngai out of his cell, his brother saw that he was "completely limp as if he was dead, gone, purple marks on his throat". When he asked if he could go with his brother, the guard told him his brother only had a stomach ache.

On 18 March, a public announcement by the Gia Nghia police headquarters announced the death of Hoang Van Ngai. According to initial reports, the police claimed Ngai had put his hand into an

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<sup>1</sup> The victim's name is Vam Ngaij Vaj in the Hmong language; Hoang Van Ngai is his Vietnamese name. The Hmong name was used in the initial reports; the Vietnamese name is used in later reports and official complaints.

electric socket. Later, Mr. Dien, Chairman of the People's Committee of Dak Nong, suggested that Ngai may have committed suicide. His family have rejected this suggestion, noting that suicide goes against the victim's Christian beliefs. They believe Ngai had no reason to commit suicide and say there is no evidence to support this claim. They also reject the public announcement, which they say did not clarify the reason for Ngai's death.

On 29 March, Ly Thi Son, Hoang Van Pa, and Ly Thi My wrote a letter of petition to the Chief of Police in Dak Nong Province requesting an investigation into the case and the indictment of the person(s) responsible for the death of Ngai and those responsible for the arrest of the petitioners.

### **3. Recommendations**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide strongly recommends that the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam immediately launches an investigation to the death of Hoang Van Ngai, to be coordinated and supervised by officials at the highest level of government.

CSW also expresses concern about the safety of the victim's relatives and others who have written reports and passed on information about this case. We therefore recommend that the government takes urgent measures to protect these individuals and the wider Hmong Christian community in the Central Highlands.