

**Expropriation of Property of Catholic Communities
Prepared by BPSOS
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Vuon Rau Loc Hung (Loc Hung Vegetables Garden)

Located in Tan Binh District, HCM City, this community has been targeted by the government for land expropriation for almost two decades. On January 4 and then January 8 of 2019, the government of Tan Binh District, HCM City mobilized hundreds of members of the public security and demolition workers to destroy an entire Catholic community that had existed since 1954 and that in recent years served as sanctuary for at-risk human rights defenders and victims of government persecution. This community started out as a settlement area for mostly Catholics who migrated South from North Vietnam as part of the 1954 Geneva Accord. The community is part of the Loc Hung Parish and most families in this community earned their living by growing vegetables that they sold at local markets.

On December 29, 2018, the People's Committee of Tan Binh District notified community members of the decision to dismantle all structures illegally erected after January 1, 2018. On January 4, 2019 hundreds of police officers escorted a large contingent of demolition workers using bulldozers to demolish two homes. On January 8, they returned to finish off the demolition of the remaining 110 homes including those built prior to 2018.¹ The entire community was destroyed. The demolition workers also uprooted many plants and trees that were the source of livelihood of community members. The police detained about ten persons who attempted to protect their homes.

Reacting to public outcry, on January 9 the government issued an official statement affirming that its policy was not to expropriate land, only to remove structures illegally built. However, the following day the government cleared the land and posted a billboard indicating that all 4.8 acres of land had been rezoned for a new school complex. Allegedly the government had bypassed the required process of consultation and compensation negotiation with the residents as required by law and ignored that most of this land is property of the Catholic Archdiocese of HCM City.

The land grab targeted a tight-knit Catholic community that had developed its own culture and lifestyle over the past 65 years. This community also served as sanctuary for victims of government persecution and at-risk human rights defenders. It is believed that the government wanted to “flush” them out. They included former prisoner of conscience Pham Thanh Nghien (5 years and 4 months of imprisonment), her husband former prisoner of conscience Huynh Anh Tu (14 years), Nguyen Tri Dung (son of blogger Dieu Cay, a former prisoner of conscience who has been exiled to the United States), journalist Ms. Pham Doan Trang... Before his arrest, Hoa Hao Buddhist human rights defender Nguyen Bac Truyen and his wife took refuge in this community. Also affected were 18 disabled veterans of the former Republic of Vietnam living in a housing project built by the Redemptorist Order. Thus, the recent land grab in Ward 6, Tan Binh District, HCM City effectively victimized not only close to one thousand parishioners of Loc Hung Parish, but also a number of human rights defenders and victims of persecution.



Loc Hung Vegetables Garden after demolition (photo of Nguyen Tri Dung)

On January 8, at 5:30am Cao Ha Truc, a resident of Vuon Rau Loc Hung and a key organizer of demonstrations against land grab, was abducted as he walked out of his home. Police officers in civilian clothes covered his head with a black plastic bag. He was taken to an unknown location where the interrogators coerced him into admitting to disturbing public order. One of them hit him in the face and on his head as he insisted that he only demonstrated against expropriation of land. He was left without food. At around 8:00pm he was moved by car to another location, his head again covered with a hood. He later he recognized this new place to be the police station of Ward 10, Tan Binh District. At 2:00am the police again forced him to admit to disturbing public order but Truc did not yield to intimidation. Thirsty, he asked for water but was denied. By 2:30am of the following day he was released along with a fellow community member who had also been arrested; when Truc arrived back at the community he found his home as well as all other homes in the community had been completely demolished.

In the Vietnamese tradition, evicting people from their residence as they prepared to welcome the Lunar New Year is considered utterly immoral and cruel. According to traditional beliefs, the first day of the lunar year would define the one's fortune for rest of that year. Becoming homeless and deprived of livelihood as Lunar New Year approaches would have dire emotional impact on the victims. Apparently, the local authorities wanted to send a clear message to Loc Hung parishioners that they must expect even worse in the months ahead.

On January 16, the Police Department of HCMC declared that they were consolidating evidence to criminally prosecute some 20 Loc Hung Vegetables Garden dwellers for obstructing officials on duty. Apparently, this move was designed to target influential community members believed by government authorities to be leading the fight against land grab.

Con Dau Parish, Da Nang City

At the time of our submission of the joint report for ICCPR Review,² the Government of Da Nang City was temporarily suspending its expropriation of lands from the remaining some 100 household of Con Dau parishioners. This suspension was partially motivated by strong international condemnation, including from the UN Special Procedures. However, on November 15, 2018 the land grab resumed -- the government sent in a demolition team along with hundreds of public security officers and anti-riot police to destroy seven homes – the ten households occupying these homes are now living in makeshift tents set up on the premises of their destroyed homes.

These seven homes were among some 40 homes still standing. Altogether they housed approximately eighty households. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hai, one of the parishioners who stayed to defend their almost 150-years old parish, was in the United States visiting her children and meeting with U.S. government officials when her home was demolished. Upon return to Vietnam she became homeless and now lives in a makeshift tent.



Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hai in front of the tent that has replaced her home, Con Dau Parish, Da Nang City, January 16, 2019

Mrs. Hai's home before demolition (photos of Con Dau Association)

The police raid against Con Dau parishioners on May 4, 2010 to carry out the government's policy of land grab came with extreme violence committed by the police during and after the raid. The government has ignored the multiple denunciations by victims of torture and police beatings.

During the raid, over 100 parishioners were beaten and injured by the police – two pregnant women later suffered miscarriage; 62 parishioners were arrested and detained – they were tortured for days, and some, for weeks. Seven of them were charged of “opposing government officials on duty” and kept in pre-trial detention. The law office of Dr. Cu Huy Ha Vu, a well-known legal scholar, agreed to represent these Con Dau parishioners. The Da Nang City government, however, barred his law firm from appearing in court. Six of the three detainees were sentenced to prison terms. At the trial, the detainees denounced the police’s use of torture to force him to admit to crimes he did not commit. The presiding judge summarily dismissed the allegation of torture and proceeded to sentence them to imprisonment. One parishioner who escaped arrest was later caught and tortured to death. Dr. Vu was also arrested on fabricated charges and then sentenced to seven years in prison. Under international pressure, Vietnam released Dr. Vu in April 2014 for direct departure to the U.S. from his prison cell.

A total of 128 of Con Dau parishioners have resettled to the United States as refugees after years of seeking asylum in Thailand. Many of them have testified before the US Congress and reported acts of torture and police violence directly to the UN Special Rapporteurs on Cultural Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Despite ample evidence, there has been no investigation into the reported massive use of violence and torture against Con Dau Parishioners. Arguably, the government would not investigate itself when the use of violence and torture was part of its policy to suppress popular resistance to land grab.

Thien An Monastery

Located in Thua Thien – Hue Province, Thien An Monastery, established in 1935 by the Saint Benedict's Catholic Order, houses 96 priests and monks. Over the years, the monks built it into a unique, beautiful, and famous farming place with an orange orchard and a pine tree forest suitable for their devout lives of contemplative activities, prayers, and labor.

The local governments, including Huong Thuy Commune, Thuy Bang Ward and Cu Chanh Village, led by the Thua Thien - Hue Province Government, have long had set their sight on the 107 hectares of land which the monastery had acquired ownership in 1940. On January 19, 1976, the monastery was forced to hand over its Thanh Mau School to the Department of Agriculture and Forestry for crop breeding. This property later became the Tien Phong Forestry Company. On Christmas Eve of 1999, the central government confiscated 49.6 hectares of land from Thien An Monastery for a tourism company to build a theme park with tourist attractions. The project was later abandoned and is now in ruins. Repeated protests and petitions for reconsideration were ignored by Ha Noi. In 2008, the City of Hue sold the land to a company located in Ha Noi.

In 2014 the government ordered the monastery not to replant the pine trees or build any new road, and has consistently blocked any construction work done by the monastery to enhance its property. The government set up a sentinel post near the monastery to monitor all activities of its priests and monks.



A government official desecrating the statue of Jesus Christ on the Crucifix

Starting in May 2015, the Public Security Department of Hue City found different ways to desecrate the statue of Christ on the Crucifix planted on the hill named Calvary Hill on the

premise of the monastery. On May 17, 2015, the statue disappeared. Four months later, the priests and monks found the statue broken into pieces at a nearby creek. After they patched up the statue and planted it back on the hill, the public security under the direction of police Major Tran Van Quang removed it on March 8, 2016. The monks and priests of the monastery resurrected this statue in 2017; on June 28 and 29, 2017 the local government sent a contingent of 200 persons, including the police, plain-clothed security agents, government cadres, and thugs to take it down. They stomped on the statue, desecrating a religious symbol. In the process the intruders brutally assaulted the priests and monks. The government also sent in mechanized vehicles to destroy the trees and raze the sports court of the monastery. The government mobilized the traffic police to block all exits from the monastery and prevent the monks and priests to take their injured brethren to the hospital. Although the victims had identified individuals involved in the beatings, no investigation was conducted.

On December 12, 2017, to prepare for Christmas the monks erected a makeshift gate on a road within the premise of the monastery; the public security police came and took it down. On March 1, 2018, the monks erected a dry pine tree to welcome the new Rector of the Monastery, again the public security police came with the mobile police, traffic police, plain-clothed security personnel, rangers and officials of Tien Phong Company – the company eyeing the land of the monastery for its development project; they confiscated the pine tree without any official warrant. On July 18, 2018 workers from this company, escorted by the public security, intruded the monastery and threatened the monks. Between those two attacks, someone set afire the pine forest on the monastery's land not once but four times: on March 4, May 10, May 22, May 23 and July 4.

In early September 2018, a private citizen started building a shrine to his ancestors on the land owned by the monastery, with official authorization by the local authorities despite the protest of the leadership of the monastery.