

Loc Hung Vegetable Garden: A Catholic community under siege

Prepared by BPSOS, January 31, 2019

In the first week of 2019, the government of Tan Binh District, HCM City mobilized hundreds of public security officers 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, popularly known as “Vuon Rau Loc Hung” (Loc Hung Vegetable Garden) – 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 the local markets.

In 1954, as close to one million North Vietnamese migrated South under the Geneva Accord, the Catholic Mission of Son Tay allowed a number of Catholic families evacuating from North Vietnam to settle on 4.8 acres of land that it owned. The tenants paid monthly rent, at a reduced rate, to the mission. Located adjacent to this community was an emission station with emission antennas operated by the French government on land loaned from the mission. The operation of this emission station was transferred to the government of the Republic of Vietnam in 1954. The ownership of the 4.8 acres of land was transferred to the Archdiocese of Saigon. Inhabitants of the Vuon Rau Loc Hung continued to pay rent

After 1975, the Communist government took over the telecommunication station; the inhabitants of Vuon Rau Loc Hung continued to occupy the land that they rented [unclear about the passage of the ownership from the Archdiocese to the tenants]. Responding to the Prime Minister’s Directive 24/1999/CT-TTg about land survey, community members at Vuon Rau Loc Hung tried to register their land use right but the local government refused to process their applications without any official explanation. In 2002 the occupants were notified that their land had been re-zoned for an economic development project without the public consultation process as required by law.

In March 2008, the local authorities sent in hundreds of police officers combined with security forces in an attempt to dismantle all houses, but they were met with strong resistance by the inhabitants. Then in August 2009, the inhabitants were informed that the government authorities of Ward 6 would send troops to dismantle facilities illegally erected – they were wooden sheds constructed by the inhabitants to store gardening equipment and products. The government’s land grab attempt failed.

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, they demolished most of the homes, including those built prior to 2018. On January 8, they returned to finish off the demolition – all 127 homes in the community were destroyed. Responding to public outcry, the government issued an official statement that this was not an attempt to expropriate land, only an operation to remove structures illegally built. However, on January 10 the government cleared the land and then posted a billboard indicating all 4.8 acres of land of the community had been rezoned for a complex of education buildings. Allegedly the government had bypassed the required process of consultation and compensation negotiation with the residents as required by law.

This land grab was not only illegal but it 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 include: 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 (son of blogger Dieu Cay), journalist Pham Doan Trang, Nguyen Thi Phuong (wife of prisoner of conscience Nguyen Bac Truyen, who is serving 11-years prison sentence), etc. Also affected were 18 disabled veterans 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.

Story of abduction of Cao Ha Truc: On January 4, Cao Ha Truc was abducted from his home by the police. Police officers in civilian clothes covered head with a black hood. He was taken to an unknown location where interrogators hit him in the face and on his head. He was left without food; thirsty, he asked for water but was denied. At... he was moved by car to another location, which later he recognized to be the police station of Ward 10, Tan Binh District.

In the Vietnamese tradition, evicting people from their residence as they prepared to welcome the lunar new year is considered utterly immoral and unacceptably cruel. According to traditional beliefs, the first day would define the rest of the lunar 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 new lunar year.

On January 16, the Police Department of HCM City declared that they were consolidating evidence to criminally prosecute some 20 Loc Hung Vegetables Garden dwellers for obstructing officials on duty. A few days later, the authorities announced the names of 6 suspects that they would prosecute. Apparently, this move was designed to target influential community members deemed by government authorities to be leaders in the fight against land grab.



Loc Hung Vegetable Garden before demolition (photo from Facebook)



Loc Hung Vegetable Garden after demolition (photo from Facebook)



Residents salvaging their property among rubbles (photo from Facebook)



A woman picking up whatever left from her demolished home (photo from Facebook)



Residents becoming homeless as Lunar New Year approached (photo from Facebook)





