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Vietnam jails 6 more Buddhists of persecuted Hoa Hao sect

Rights activists say religious movement is being unfairly and illegally targeted

By Long Xuyen

UCA News (12.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2nWi293> - Six Buddhists affiliated with the Hoa Hao religious movement including four family members have been handed prison terms for disrupting public order after clashing with police last year.

Rights groups argue this is another case of religious persecution after police stopped sect leaders from celebrating their founder's birthday last month.

Some Buddhists have also died in police custody under suspicious circumstances.

Bui Van Trung, 54, and his son Bui Van Tham, 31, were sentenced to six years each in the latest ruling. His daughter Bui Thi Bich Tuyen, 36, was given three years and his wife, 56-year-old Le Thi Hen, was put under house arrest for two years.

Two other followers — Nguyen Hoang Nam, 36, and Le Thi Hong Hanh, 39 — were jailed for four years and three years, respectively.

They were all found guilty of "causing public disorder."

Tham was also convicted of "resisting officers on public duty" by the People's Court in An Phu district of An Giang Province on Feb. 9.

A Hoa Hao Buddhist activist said Hen suffered a heart attack during the trial and was being closely guarded by police.

"The sentences are unfair and show the government is trying to persecute Hoa Hao Buddhists who refuse to join a state-approved group," he said.

He said the defendants had merely tried to protect other followers who were being stopped by police and gangsters en route to attending an event on April 19, 2017 marking the anniversary of Trung's mother's death.

Police confiscated motorcycle registration documents and scooters, beat two people until they were unconscious and injured many others, activists claim.

Trung and Tham were arrested months later as they returned home from the mourning ceremony of another sect member on June 26.

Police also gave Trung's youngest daughter a beating that rendered her unconsciousness and saw her hospitalized, the family claims.

In 2012, Trung and Tham received respective jail terms of four years and 30 months for opposing authorities on duty.

Trung was accused of preaching at his house without the proper authorization. He said he suffered intrusive surveillance, harassment and intimidation on a regular basis.

"Vietnam should suspend the charges against the six Hoa Hao Buddhist followers and investigate whether the police action against them was discriminatory or a case of religious persecution," Human Rights Watch said ahead of the trial.

"This appears to be the latest instance of official persecution of members of this religion," said Brad Adams, the group's Asia director.

"The government should stop harassing and arresting those who belong to unsanctioned religious groups and leave people to practice their faith as they see fit."

Nine more people from the same sect received prison sentences totaling 50 years and 10 years' probation for conducting a campaign against the government in December and January.

Four Buddhists were handed a total of 31 years in prison on Jan. 23 for conducting campaigns against the government.

At least 129 people are imprisoned in Vietnam for expressing views that are critical of the government, taking part in peaceful protests, participating in religious groups not approved by the authorities, or joining civil or political organizations that the ruling Communist Party deems threatening to its monopoly on power, Human Rights Watch said.

Vietnamese Catholics protest officials' interference in their parish



RFA (03.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EhnjOo> - Leaders of a Catholic monastery in north-central Vietnam's Thua Thien Hue province are protesting authorities' interference in the life of their community, accusing local officials of seeking to have their senior priest removed from his office, sources say.

In a Dec. 31 letter sent to top-level authorities in the province, priests at Thien An asserted their legal right to construct buildings on nearby village land owned and managed by the church since the 1940s.

They also accused members of the Thua Thien Hue People's Committee of abusing their power by proposing the transfer to another province of monastery head Father Nguyen Van Duc, who had protested the seizure last year of monastery land.

By declaring in a Dec. 23 report to higher-ups that Duc had broken the law, the province's People's Committee had offended the dignity of the priest and had illegally interfered in the monastery's internal affairs, the priests' letter said.

Founded by French missionaries in June 1940, Thien An monastery is home to a community of priests, nuns, and seminarians who perform pastoral activities in three different churches.

In June, police dressed in plain clothes attacked Thien An priests and their followers when the Catholics attempted to defend a cross they had put up on land claimed by the church, sources told RFA in earlier reports.

"They threw stones at the priests and beat three or four of them," one source said, adding that the attackers were accompanied by women and unidentified civilians who helped police to pull down the cross.

In June 2016, police stopped Thien An priests from building a road leading to the monastery's garden, prompting Duc to petition national and foreign officials in Vietnam and at the U.S. embassy in Hanoi over what he called the illegal seizure of church land.

Authorities in Vietnam have long repressed the Catholic Church in the one-party state and subjected it to forced evictions, land grabs, and attacks on priests and their followers, sources say.

The U.S. State Department's 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, issued in August 2017, said that Vietnamese government authorities restricted the activities of religious groups, assaulting and detaining church members, restricting their travel, and confiscating church land for development projects.

Groups not registered with the state were especially severely treated, the State Department said.
