

# Vietnamese Catholics protest officials' interference in their parish

RFA (03.01.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2Ehnj0o> – 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.