

Lao Christians detained for 'breaking rules' on Christmas celebration



Christian villagers in Laos' Bolikhamxay province are shown in an undated photo. Photo sent by an RFA listener

RFA (22.01.2017) - Five Lao Christians were detained by authorities in western Laos's Savannakhet province this month after a group in one village invited a pastor from a neighboring area to help organize Christmas celebrations, a local resident told RFA's Lao Service this week.

The invitation was a breach of regulations designed to restrict Christian practice in the province's Phin district, RFA's source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Early last week, as Christians in the Non Soung village of Phin district were preparing for Christmas celebrations, a Christian pastor from another village in the same district came to help organize the festivities," RFA's source said.

"A couple of days later, district security guards arrested five Christians—four from Non Soung village and the pastor who had come from the other village nearby," he said.

The five are still believed to be held in custody, with no word immediately available on their condition of present whereabouts, RFA's source said.

"As a rule, villagers can hold Christmas celebrations only in their own village. People from other villages are not allowed to come over," the source said.

Also speaking to RFA, a Phin district official declined to discuss the arrests but confirmed that Christian observances in Phin are subject to a wide range of controls.

"In general, Christians are still restricted in this district," the official said, also speaking on condition he not be named.

"They are not allowed to teach from the Bible or to spread their religion to others, because Christianity is the religion of the Europeans and Americans," he said.

Worse in remote regions

Christians continued to be detained across Laos during last year, with a pastor in one village in Luang Prabang arrested for preaching to residents of another village, according to World Watch Monitor, a group tracking persecution of Christians worldwide.

In another case, more than 50 Christian residents of a village in Bolikhamxay province were ordered by other villagers to renounce their faith, and when they refused, one was gunned down and the others forced to flee, the rights group said.

Restrictions on both registered and unregistered minority religious groups, especially Protestants, "remained disproportionately high in certain remote regions" of Laos during 2016, the U.S. State Department said this year in an annual report.

"NGOs stated the relatively decentralized nature of the government structure contributed to abuses on the part of local officials, some of whom were reportedly unaware of laws and policies protecting religious freedom or [were] unwilling to implement them," the State Department said.

Reported by RFA's Lao Service. Translated by Max Avary. Written in English by Richard Finney.