

Christians in Laos defy church closure order

Country/Region: South and East Asia, Lao, People's Democratic Republic

A group of Laotian Christians are standing up for religious freedom in the country by resisting the closure of their church building, which was among four confiscated by the authorities in one district.

On 5 April, officials ordered the confiscation and closure of the church in Khamnongsung village, Saybuli district, Savannakhet province. They claimed that the Christians did not have permission for the building, which dates back to 1968, before the current government came to power.



The Communist government of Laos sees Christianity as a threat

It followed a three-day political seminar in Khamnongsung, attended by the district's head of religious affairs and deputy police chief, which covered "Tricks of the Enemy"; Western powers were said to be using the Christian faith as a ruse to destabilise the Communist regime in Laos.

Christians in Khamnongsung were told that they could meet for worship only in their homes. But the church, which comprises 745 people, has defied the order, holding Sunday services in the building for the two ensuing weeks. Members have said that they are willing to risk their safety and that of their families to defend religious freedom, which is under sustained attack in Laos.

The confiscation of Khamnongsung church follows the closure of three others in the district: Kengweng, Nadaeng and Dongpaiwan. Kengweng and Nadaeng, which were targeted in February 2012 and December 2011 respectively, have made written petitions to the authorities, requesting the return of their church buildings, but are still being denied entrance. Kengweng church is gathering at a site adjacent to their building.

Dongpaiwan church was closed by the authorities in September 2011. The congregation now holds services in a house next to its confiscated building.

Other churches in Saybuli district are vulnerable to takeover; the authorities have said that they recognise only Dongpoong village church.

A 2002 religious law requires all church buildings to have official permission to be built and/or to operate. The Khamnongsung church was constructed well before this law came into force. Thus Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom said that if the church buildings had been seized under this law, the government was guilty of applying the legislation retrospectively.

Church ambushed

Elsewhere in Savannakhet province, officials ambushed a church service in Paksong village, Songkorn district, arrested the church leader and barred the congregation from holding any further services there.

The pastor was later released after being threatened and coerced to sign a document agreeing to discontinue church services.

Officials claimed that the Christians did not have permission to hold services, but this had been granted by the former village chief.