

# **CHRISTIANS SENTENCED** **FOR PRAYER, WORSHIP**

Imprisoned 2 to 3 years for Sunday meetings held at home

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Four Vietnamese Christians who organized and led weekly worship services in a house church were sentenced to prison for "disturbing public order."

The Christians, members of the heavily persecuted Hmong ethnic group, were handed terms of 26 to 36 months in late March 2004, according to a report released yesterday by the Center for Religious Freedom at Freedom House, a Washington, D.C. human-rights group.

The four are among 10 Christians reported last month to be in custody because of their faith. They now are being held under harsh conditions, the Center for Religious Freedom said. The men, arrested in November and December of 2003, were accused in connection with meetings of 50 or 60 people that took place over six consecutive Sundays, according to a document obtained by the center.

The arrests are part of a wave of anti-Christian persecution under way in the ethnic Hmong areas of Vietnam, the center reported. The four are residents of Giap Trung Village, Thang Tin Commune, Ha Giang province, which has become the scene of an intense anti-Christian campaign by Vietnamese officials.

The Christians sentence are:

- Ly Chin Sang, age 60, a Christian since 1991, sentenced to 36 months. His wife is Giang Thi Ca, and they have a 19-year-old son living at home.
- Ly Sin Quang, 28, son of Ly Chin Sang, a Christian since 1991. He and his wife, Vang Thi Da, have four young children. [No length of sentence given.]
- Vang Chin Sang, age 56, sentenced to 36 months and a

- Christian since 1999, is married to Ma Thi Pang. They have a 13-year-old son at home.
- Vang My Ly, age 24, has been a Christian since 1991. He was sentenced to 26 months. His wife is Ma Thi Di and the couple has three small children.

The Washington-based group says letters from families describe the prisoners' hardships. Three additional letters written in March by Christians in Xin Man District, Ha Giang province, detail the confiscation of Vietnamese Bibles, an electronic keyboard, numerous personal effects and cash. The authors also describe being threatened with fines unless they agree to abandon Christianity and reestablish an altar to their ancestors.

The Center for Religious Freedom says due to international pressure, Vietnamese authorities recently have begun to avoid referring to Christianity when making charges against believers, using the term "illegal religion" instead. The government recognizes as legitimate only clans of Christians who were believers before the 1954 communist revolution.

The center reported earlier this month the Vietnamese military has used drug injections in Lai Chau Province in its campaign to pressure Hmong Christians to sign statements recanting their faith.

In November, the center reported the extradition of a key Hmong church leader, Ma Van Bay, from the southern province of Binh Phuoc. A trial in his case was announced for April 28, although the charges are not known.

Center director Nina Shea describes persecuted Hmong Christians as "truly forgotten people, living up in the highlands, speaking their own language, and lacking influential contacts in the outside world."

Hmong Christians, she says, "are twice victims, both as Christians and as members of a disfavored minority. Behind the friendly façade of normality that the Vietnamese government shows to investors and tourists lays a more sinister reality."

Vietnamese authorities allow a greater degree of religious freedom than in the 1990s, but the government still keeps all religious institutions in its control under the umbrella of the Communist Party's Fatherland Front. Members of unsanctioned groups –

particularly minorities such as the Hmong – frequently suffer harassment, arrest and imprisonment, and the state-approved organizations face many restrictions, including limitations on training and ordination of clergy.

Other ethnic minorities facing persecution, according to human-rights groups, are Degar, Mien and Montagnard Christians. Members of the latter group, in the Central Highlands, have been executed by injection; say human-rights groups such as Britain's Jubilee Campaign.