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Viet Nam: Growing fear, growing discrimination

The Vietnamese government must end its intimidation and attacks against Catholics and ensure protection against violence by state-sponsored groups, Amnesty International said today.

The widening persecution comes after the authorities cracked down on peaceful mass protests by Catholics in Ha Noi at the end of September 2008. In August and September, Catholics gathered in the thousands to show their support for the church's claims in a land dispute.

In a briefing paper released today, based on new information, Amnesty International illustrates how Catholics are increasingly physically and verbally attacked and intimidated in the wake of the crackdown. The report is based on interviews with church groups, journalists and parishioners in the country.

"And they shout bad words about our mothers and fathers, and say things like "kill the archbishop" and "kill the priests" a young Catholic woman told Amnesty International. "Last Sunday evening when I came from church, there were maybe 400-500 people there, many in blue shirts, shouting slogans and holding banners."

As the campaign in state-controlled media against the Catholic protestors is intensifying, counter-protesters and state sponsored groups are gathering outside the Archdiocese and the Thai Ha parish in Ha Noi, harassing and intimidating church leaders and parishioners. At least one Catholic church outside of Ha Noi has been attacked by stone-throwing gangs.

Authorities are also using criminal law to stifle free expression of opinion. Four protestors have been detained and charged, and numerous parishioners have been called in for questioning at police stations in recent days. Moreover Amnesty International believes that senior church officials are at risk of arrest.

Background

Catholics started protesting in December 2007 over a long-running dispute about ownership of two pieces of land in Ha Noi. The land belonged to the Catholic Church until the 1950s when it was confiscated by the state. Negotiations between the church and the government stalled in February 2008 and in August and September thousands of people, some from other parts of the country, joined in the peaceful protest. By the end of September, the authorities had sealed off the areas under dispute and put an end to the mass vigils.

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