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LAOS Christian villagers driven from homes face starvation

A group of approximately 65 villagers, who were driven from their village at gunpoint for refusing to give up Christianity, are facing starvation as local authorities in Laos destroy crops and prevent food from reaching the group.

The 18 families have been living in a temporary camp outside Katin village, Ta-Oyl district, Saravan province since they were marched from their village at gunpoint in two separate incidents in 2010 for refusing to give up their Christian faith.

A report received from a CSW source this week said that village officials are refusing to allow the Christians to enter the village to farm their land. An area that had been farmed around the camp has been destroyed. Village officials have instructed families in surrounding villages not to help or provide food for the group, who lack access to adequate food, water and sanitation facilities, and medical treatment. It is reported that the villagers believe these tactics are an attempt to starve them in order that they give up their Christian faith.

At first 11 families were driven from the village at gunpoint during a worship service in January 2010, before a further seven families of new converts to Christianity were driven out in December 2010. Despite international advocacy on the case, the dire situation has not improved. One man from the group has died during this time.

In March 2010, the district head of Ta-Oyl, Mr. Bounma, met with the group and urged them to reconsider their decision to follow the Christian faith, encouraging them to renounce their Christian beliefs. The group refused, and on hearing this Mr. Bounma reportedly stated that while the Lao Constitution provided protection for freedom of religion and belief, he did not allow Christianity in his district. He threatened the group with expulsion from the district if they refused to renounce their faith.

The Laos Constitution provides protection for its people to practice a religion of their choice without discrimination. However, legislative protection is weak and implementation at a local level can be arbitrary. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion in Laos. Religious minorities, including Christians, can face harassment.

CSW's National Director Stuart Windsor said, "CSW calls upon the Lao government to adhere to the constitutional protection afforded to all its citizens by allowing the Katin villagers to return to their homes. CSW calls upon international actors to hold the Lao authorities accountable for the ongoing violations of the rights of the villagers to freedom of religion and belief and afford them their economic and social rights to live in their village, sustain themselves by farming and have access to medical treatment."