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VIETNAM 130 detained as military disbands ethnic minority cult followers

130 men have been detained and military personnel have been sent to Dien Bien province, North West Vietnam to seal off an area where ethnic Hmong followers of a cultic movement were disbanded by local military and the Vietnam People's Army last week. Several thousand cult followers, mostly women and children, were sent home, but sources suggest up to 3,000 remain.

CSW sources reported that two cult leaders fled into the forest and were beaten by the military. Journalists and foreign diplomats are denied access to the Muong Nhe area and all telephone communications are cut. There are concerns for those who remain in the area due to the lack of access to outsiders, poor sanitary conditions and the high military presence. Three children are confirmed to have died. Church leaders within Vietnam told CSW they are concerned that the Hmong Protestant Christians who are not followers of the cult will be falsely identified as such.

The group had gathered following the teaching of two cult movements that have been active among the Hmong ethnic group in recent months. A Vietnamese government website erroneously portrays the followers as Protestant Christians. The US-based Harold Camping cult, which teaches that the world will end on 21 May, has gathered a following among the Hmong after Hmong-language materials were distributed. In addition, two men, both claiming to be "Messiah" figures have appeared in Muong Nhe district. Many thousands of Hmong have migrated from other areas of the country, including from as far as the Central Highland region, to follow this teaching. Hmong mythological belief suggests that a messiah will appear and establish a pan-Hmong kingdom.

The North-West mountainous region has suffered some of the most egregious abuses and restrictions on religious freedom in Vietnam. While the general situation has improved in recent years, the cumulative affect of restrictions on religious freedom, such as restricting access to theological training and not allowing a legal Hmong Bible to be printed, has created conditions where cult teaching spreads easily.

Up to 350,000 Hmong have converted to Protestantism since the late 1980s on hearing short-wave radio broadcasts in local languages.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW calls upon the Vietnamese government to show restraint and ensure that the rights of ethnic minorities are protected during this time of tension. We also call upon the international community to press Vietnam to uphold the right of religious freedom for all Vietnamese citizens and to encourage Vietnam that it is in their best interest to allow ethnic minorities better access to training, literature and legal Bibles so that they can protect themselves from cult teaching."

Notes to Editors:

The Vietnamese government has long been suspicious of the Protestant religion. According to Compass Direct, an official Vietnamese government website began a disinformation campaign against the Vang Chu religion (the name used by Hmong to describe their Protestant faith) accusing Hmong Protestants of drug smuggling, stealing land, destroying forests and being a threat to national security. The website also tied the Vang Chu religion to the recently-deceased Hmong General Vang Pao, who led CIA-supported Hmong forces in Laos against the communists during the Vietnam War, and supported a resistance movement in the years following. It

suggests that the Vang Chu religious is a perversion of Protestantism and that it is being exploited by “enemy forces” to subvert communism.