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VIETNAM Christian land rights activists to go on trial

Three Mennonite Christians accused of “attempting to overthrow the government of Vietnam” will go on trial along with four other activists charged with the same crime in Ben Tre province imminently. The three were active in campaigning for land rights, and if convicted they may face a lengthy prison sentence or a death sentence.

Pastor Duong Kim Khai, Tran Thi Thuy and Nguyen Thanh Tam have been held since August 2010 without access to lawyers or their families. They are members of the unrecognized branch of the Mennonite church and attended the “Cow Shed Church” in Ho Chi Minh City. Inspired by their Christian faith, they worked assisting fellow Vietnamese citizens who lost farmland when it was forcibly sold by local government to large corporations, helping them to file complaint letters asking for adequate compensation.

The three men are also said to be members of Viet Tan, an overseas-based democracy party. The charges, defined under Article 79 of the Criminal Law, are ill-defined.

Pastor Duong Kim Khai was taken away from his workshop in Ho Chi Minh City on August 10, 2010 by a group of five or six people, who bundled him into a car with a Ben Tre registration plate. His workshop was then searched and materials relating to complaint letters were confiscated. Pastor Khai’s disabled wife and then 17-year-old son were not given arrest papers or details of Pastor Khai’s detention. Those close to the case told CSW Pastor Khai is a gentle man who wanted to help others and speak up for injustice.

Human rights activists are under huge pressure in Vietnam, where there has been an increase in arrests and restrictions on freedom of expression in recent months.

CSW’s Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “CSW calls upon the Vietnamese authorities to allow Pastor Duong Kim Khai, Tran Thi Thuy and Nguyen Thanh Tam access to legal representation at the trial, and for it to follow due procedure as defined in international law. They are facing lengthy sentences for peacefully standing up for the rights of fellow citizens. CSW requests that these men, whose cases are representative of the pressures facing human rights defenders, be released immediately to their families.”

Notes to Editors:

1. Vietnam requires legal registration of denominational groups and registration can only be granted following twenty years’ “stable operation.”
2. There are two branches of the Mennonite Church in Vietnam – one is registered and the other is not. The “Cow Shed Church” belongs to the unregistered branch.]
3. The other four activists are Pham Van Thong, Nguyen Chi Thanh, Ms. Pham Ngoc Hoa and Cao Van Tinh.