



#### 4.2.13

### **VIETNAM | Concerns After Christian Leader Dies in Custody**

A Vietnamese church leader reportedly died in police custody on March 17 after being severely beaten and possibly electrocuted.

Vam Ngaij Vaj was an elder at a church affiliated to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), a legally recognized religious denomination, and a member of the Hmong ethnic group from the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

He was detained for “destroying the forest” while clearing brush from his field with his wife. The police claim that he died after accidentally putting his hand into an electric socket. Photographs taken soon after his death show severe and bloody bruising on his back and neck, leading witnesses to conclude that he was beaten violently before his death.

CSW’s sources report that members of Vaj’s community believe that the official charge of “destroying the forest” was merely an excuse to terrorize local Hmong Christians, and that Hmong leaders “know of no reason why they are being so mistreated, except that they are Christians.”

Many of the Hmong Christians now living in the Central Highlands were originally from the northwest of the country, where Christian communities are subject to arbitrary arrest, beatings by police, forced or coerced eviction, and fines for converting to Christianity. Over the past two decades, they have fled the north in large numbers as a result of religious persecution, believing they would be able to practice their faith freely further south.

Even in the Central Highlands, both registered, legal churches and unregistered congregations are subject to freedom of religion or belief restrictions and, in some cases, gross violations of their human rights. Last month, CSW received reports of Hmong Christians being subject to various forms of harassment and intimidation by the authorities and local thugs working with them, including destruction of property, violent physical assault and confiscation of land.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We express our heartfelt condolences to Vam Ngaij Vaj's family and community. CSW calls on the Vietnamese government to fully investigate the circumstances surrounding his death in light of signs that he was tortured while in police custody and to hold those responsible to account. The government must also ensure that religious freedom is upheld at a local level in all parts of the country, in order to prevent further violations against Hmong Christians and other believers."