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VIETNAM | Fresh Reports Shed Light on Church Leader's Death

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received new information concerning the circumstances surrounding the death of Vietnamese church leader Hoang Van Ngai (also known as Vam Ngaij Vaj), who died in police custody in Dak Glong District in Dak Nong Province on March 17.

Police claims that Ngai died after putting his hand into an electric socket have been contested by his family members.

Reports by Ngai's relatives state that his wife and sister-in-law were arrested on March 14 and were forcibly taken to the police station in Gia Nghia. Ngai and his elder brother Hoang Van Pa were arrested the following day and were detained in adjacent cells. The reason for the arrests was not clear. The police did not present or refer to any arrest warrant or temporary detention order.

At approximately 3 p.m. on March 17, Ngai's brother heard the sound of violent beating coming from his brother's cell. When the police took Ngai out of his cell, his brother saw that he was "completely limp as if he was dead, gone, purple marks on his throat." Prison guards denied Pa's request to go with his brother.

Ngai was an elder of Bui Tre Church, which belongs to a legally recognized denomination, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South). According to other members of the Hmong community, Ngai was a compassionate and courageous person who helped those in need and defended the church he helped to build. Ngai's older brother believes he made enemies among government officials because he stood up against abuses of power and refused to pay bribes.

On March 18, the police headquarters announced that Ngai was dead. His family felt that this announcement did not make clear the reason for his death. In addition, the family rejects the suggestion made by Mr. Dien, Chairman of the People's Committee of Dak Nong Province, that

Ngai may have committed suicide. Ngai's wife, brother and sister-in-law have submitted a letter of petition to the Chief of Police in Dak Nong Province requesting an investigation into the case and the indictment of the person(s) responsible for Ngai's death and the arrest of his family members.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "As more information comes to light about the tragic circumstances of Hoang Van Ngai's death, CSW again calls on the Vietnamese government to fully investigate this case and the possibility that the victim was tortured while in police custody. We also urge the government to take measures to guarantee that the right to religious freedom is upheld across the country, in order to prevent further violations against believers."