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VIETNAM | Catholic Petitioners Beaten by Police Outside Cathedral

On the morning of July 31, Catholics praying for the resolution of land disputes outside Notre Dame Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City were forcibly removed and beaten by police and security agents.

An unknown number of people praying in front of the statue of Our Lady, just outside the Cathedral's main entrance, were dragged onto buses by police. Those who resisted were brutally beaten and had their mobile phones taken away. Following the assault, several people are being treated in the hospital. In photographs of one young woman beaten by police, her face is swollen and bruised and her mouth filled with dried blood.

The petitioners had reportedly come to the church from their homes in the southeastern and southwestern provinces to pray for the resolution of land disputes after their land and property was seized by the local authorities, according to reports posted on Dân Làm Báo, a Vietnamese-language blog. Despite having participated in dozens of lawsuits, the petitioners' complaints have not been resolved.

The unlawful confiscation of land is a significant problem in Vietnam, and one that directly affects the Catholic Church. In recent years, the Church has put forward claims for land and property confiscated in the 1950s. In 2008, peaceful protests and prayer vigils held by petitioners calling for land and property to be returned to the Church were brutally suppressed by police. Then in June 2012, the authorities in Nghe An Province attacked Catholics in Quy Chau District in an attempt to confiscate land owned by the church. A large group violently attacked parishioners, leaving several with serious cuts and bruises to their face and body.

A briefing, issued by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in April 2012, tracked human rights violations against Catholic communities in 2012-13. Violations included physical attacks on priests and laypersons, disruptions to religious services, destruction of property and damage to gravestones and sacred statues.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW condemns the Vietnamese authorities' decision to forcibly remove and violently beat Catholics who had come to church to pray. This was a peaceful gathering of religious believers at a legally recognized venue. The actions of the police and security agents are completely unjustified and are a violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief, enshrined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Vietnam acceded to in 1982. We call on the Vietnamese Government to protect the right to religious freedom of Catholics and other religious minorities in Vietnam, and to immediately end the use of force against peaceful religious activities."