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## VIETNAM | Catholics Sentenced Despite Community Protests

Two Vietnamese Catholics, whose arrest sparked mass protests in My Yen parish, Nghe An Province last month, were sentenced to six and seven months' imprisonment, respectively, on Oct. 23.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that their families were not allowed to attend the closed-door trial, which lasted around three hours.

Nguyen Van Hai and Ngo Van Khoi were arrested on June 27 and later charged with "disturbing public order", following an incident that occurred on May 22, when men believed to be plainclothes police officers stopped and searched Catholics visiting a shrine and attending Mass at a church in Nghi Phuong Commune. The police officers did not show any identification, and there was confusion among the crowd as to their identity. Some people reportedly believed them to be robbers.

It is unclear exactly why Nguyen Van Hai and Ngo Van Khoi were arrested. Some sources say they were arguing with the plainclothes officers while others say they were simply being used as scapegoats for the unrest.

Members of the Catholic community and Bishop Paul Nguyen Thai Hop, the Bishop of Vinh, petitioned for their release. In response, the local district chief issued a paper promising the two men would be released on Sept. 4. When this promise was not upheld, several hundred petitioners surrounded the District Office, and the military arrived to dispel the crowd, armed with guns, batons, tear gas, and guard dogs. According to CSW's sources inside the country, police and soldiers beat petitioners with electric batons smashed religious icons in the area. Between 21 and 40 people were injured.

Following the attacks, Bishop Paul Nguyen Thai Hop appealed for "international support and solidarity."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "These sentences come as a huge disappointment to the Catholic community in Nghe An, who have been petitioning for the release of Hai and Khoi for over four months. In the process, Vietnamese Catholics' right to freedom of religion or belief has been severely restricted and the community has been subject to constant intimidation and harassment. The fact that the two men were tried in a closed-door trial is of particular concern. CSW calls on the Vietnamese government to release the two men, to halt all attacks on religious minorities in Vietnam and lift restrictions on their religious freedom."