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## **VIETNAM | Christian Lawyer Assaulted After Human Rights Conference**

Vietnamese Christian lawyer Nguyen Van Dai and three of his friends were assaulted by police Dec. 6 after attending a human rights conference.

On the morning of the Dec. 6, Nguyen travelled to Nam Dan District, Nghe An Province, to facilitate and participate in a human rights forum, accompanied by three of his friends named Trung, Minh and Thang. The forum was open to the public and intended to serve as a platform for Nguyen and his friends to educate the citizens of Nghe An about their rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), as guaranteed in the Vietnamese Constitution. CSW has received several reports of FoRB violations in Nghe An, which has a significant Catholic population.

Approximately 60 people attended and the event proceeded without interruption, despite initial requests by the police to cancel the forum. Afterwards, Nguyen and his friends travelled to Quan Hanh, the capital of Nghi Loc District. Upon their arrival, they were met by approximately 20 plain-clothed police, who proceeded to confront them and beat them with wooden sticks, striking their shoulders and thighs.

Nguyen was pulled onto a motorcycle and driven to a different province about 12 miles from Nghi Loc, where the beatings continued, and he received a blow to the head. Nguyen's possessions were confiscated, including documents, his phone, camera and wallet. His jacket and shoes were also taken from him, and he was pushed into the cold sea.

Eventually, Nguyen managed to borrow a phone and contact his friends, asking for help. However, Nguyen was followed and suffered a further attack. With the help of some Catholic residents in Nghe An, Nguyen was eventually able to return to Hanoi on Dec. 7.

Trung, Minh, and Thang also had their possessions confiscated. Some Catholic residents helped Trung and Minh to escape and return to Hanoi. Thang has also returned to Hanoi.

CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We call for an immediate investigation into the violent attacks upon these individuals and for those responsible to be held to account. Lawyer Nguyen Van Dai and his friends were simply seeking to educate Vietnamese citizens about the rights stipulated in Vietnam’s own Constitution, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. Today, on International Human Rights Defenders Day, we echo the words of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Michel Forst in calling for better support and protection of defenders by states, donors and the general public. We agree that human rights defenders, including those who promote the right to freedom of religion or belief, deserve our unequivocal support. We call on the government of Vietnam to protect the rights of individuals like Dai and his colleagues, and to allow them to carry out their vital work without interference or threats to their personal safety.”