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VIETNAM | Nuns Beaten During Peaceful Protest

A group of Catholic nuns peacefully protesting construction on land belonging to their congregation were physically assaulted May 9 by unknown assailants. According to the Association to Protect Freedom of Religion, nuns of the Sisters of St. Paul in Hanoi marched to the Hoan Kiem District People's Committee Office and the Tran Hung Dao Ward Office on May 8 carrying banners demanding that the authorities order a halt to construction on land belonging to the St. Paul congregation.

A group of unknown “thugs” insulted and beat the nuns with batons as they tried to peacefully protest. Police nearby did not intervene. CSW received numerous reports which indicate that unknown assailants or “hired thugs” are commonly used by police and authorities in Vietnam to intimidate, harass and assault religious communities. After the assault, the nuns went to the District Office to petition the authorities to intervene, but their request was not taken up.

UCA News reported that the nuns stated that their congregation took legal ownership of the land in 1949. In 1954, the authorities divided the site and sold it to other people. The nuns have repeatedly requested the return of the land. In 2016, the authorities did intervene to prevent a resident from building on the land. On the most recent occasion, officials have so far refused to make any decision on the nuns' demand, according to the UCA News report.

Although Catholicism is recognized by the Vietnamese government, some Catholic communities in urban areas have been harassed when they have protested for the return of land and property confiscated by the authorities. In addition, some Catholic communities in rural areas are still not recognized by local authorities and priests are prevented from celebrating Mass.

Catholic clergy have been critical of a new law on religion and belief which came into effect this year. Religious communities, lawyers and human rights activists have criticized the law for interfering in the internal affairs of religious organizations and for the burdensome and challenging process of applying for registration. They further criticized vague and ambiguous

language concerning “national unity” and “traditions” which could be used to reject applications for registration.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW condemns this attack on nuns peacefully protesting for the return of land in Vietnam and the lack of intervention by police officers present at the scene. We call on the Vietnamese authorities to immediately cease all forms of harassment and intimidation against this community, to accept their petition for the return of their land, and to allow them to practice their religion and conduct religious activities without restriction.”