

Buddhist monks evicted from their pagoda in Vietnam

The government wants to replace the place of worship with residential buildings Buddhist monks evicted from their pagoda in Vietnam

Government officials have forced Buddhist monks to leave their pagoda to make way for a development project in Ho Chi Minh City.



Hundreds of police and state security officials Sept. 8 erected barriers on roads leading to the Lien Tri Pagoda. The 70-year-old temple is run by the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, which is not recognized by the government.

Officials rushed into the temple while Venerable Thich Khong Tanh, the head monk, and others were sitting on the floor to peacefully protest against the eviction.

"Venerable Thich Khong Tanh fainted from shock. The police drove him to a local hospital and kept him there. He is still weak and using an oxygen mask," a witness who did not want to be identified told ucanews.com. Dozens of followers are holding a vigil.

The witness said police took the other monks to a remote house in neighboring Dong Nai province. They also had the pagoda's worship items and furniture removed before destroying the building.

The government has in recent years moved most of the local people to other places and started to build infrastructure for a new residential area. They promised to pay the pagoda 9 billion dong (US\$405,000) and give them a plot of land in Dong Nai but the monks refused.

"Our pagoda has existed for a long time here and we want to continue serving local residents in the future," Tanh, who is in his 70s, told ucanews.com. "The government intentionally removed us to destroy the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam."

The monk has been imprisoned three times for a total of 16 years for allegedly opposing the Vietnamese regime and undermining national unity.

Church observers say after Lien Tri Pagoda, the government plans to remove a Catholic church and convent the only two religious facilities that remain in the area.

Nguyen Manh Hung, a Protestant Pastor who has close relations with the Buddhist community, said the eviction was illegal. "They evicted the monks without any notice," he said.

Vietnam's 90 million people represents a diverse and often overlapping mix of faiths, with as many as 45 percent practicing folk religions, more than 12 percent Buddhist and nearly seven percent Catholic.

While authorities have recently improved their treatment of followers of organized religions, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide and the United Nations, minority faiths continue to face harassment by authorities, particularly those viewed as a political threat.

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