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ASIA/LAOS - Local officials to Christians: "abjure your faith"

Luang Prabang (Agenzia Fides) - Local government officials, with threats and intimidation, want to force groups of Lao Christians to abjure their faith. This is "plain violation of the Constitution of Laos, which guarantees freedom of religion," is what is said in a message sent to Fides by the NGO "Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom" (HRWLRF).
In past weeks, the police issued an expulsion order against ten Christian families (a total of 65 members) of the village of Hueygong, Pakoo district in the province of Luang Prabang (in the north of Laos), giving them time until 18 March 2012 to abjure the Christian faith. The expulsion order came after the district government of Pakoo refused to recognize the presence of Christians in its district, although there are eight Christian churches in the area. According to zealous officials, in order to profess the Christian faith it must be approved by the District Office for Religious Affairs. According to sources of Fides, the head of Religious Affairs Office in the province of Luang Prabang, Bousée Chantuma, tried to intervene to withdraw the deportation order, arguing that it has no legal basis and that there is an abuse of local power officials.
Incidents of this kind are multiplying: on March 2 a few leaders of the police district in Viengphuka (province of Luang Namtha) convened a Christian named Khamla, recently converted to Christianity after the recovery from an illness. They questioned him, releasing him with an ultimatum: "Abandon the Christian religion or you will be expelled from the village." The ultimatum, note sources of Fides, is not based on any law or regulation.
In another case reported to Fides, which occurred in January, the village authorities of Hueysell (in the province of Luang Prabang), home to 14 Christian families (about 80 people), called two Christian leaders and verbally ordered the Christians to abandon their faith, threatening punishment or expulsion from the country. The local faithful did not succumb to local pressures, and, so far, the village authorities have not completed the expulsion.
"The Lao government continues to assert that the people of Laos have the freedom to profess a faith of their choice but, in practice, Christian citizens are subjected to interrogations, harassment and threats of expulsion when they exercise the right, constitutionally guaranteed, to profess the Christian faith," notes HRWLRF. The NGO urges the Government of Laos to uphold the Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by the Laotian government. It also asks the authorities to punish authorities that abuse their power and enact laws that uphold the law and the freedom to believe and practice any faith, without restrictions. Christians in Laos are about 200 thousand, out of 6.4 million inhabitants, mostly Buddhists. (PA)
(Agenzia Fides 09/03/2012)

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