



ASIA/LAOS - "Year of Faith" amid the persecutions of Christians forced to become "animists"

Savannakhet (Agenzia Fides) - Some loatian civilian officials of the province of Savannakhet threaten to destroy the homes of Christians in the village of Seekaew if they refuse to perform animist religious rituals. According to information received from local sources of Fides Agency, the local authorities of the province in any way wish to discourage Christian citizens from professing their faith and practicing their religion freely.

As reported to Fides by the NGO "Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom" (HRWLRP), more than 50 Christians (of 13 families) of the village of Seekaew were strongly recommended by the village elders to undergo traditional animistic rituals and drink "sacred water" according to the ritual of a medium. By participating in these rituals, Christians would be recognized as "animists" and profess traditional religions. After several attempts, the Christians refused and therefore, according to local leaders, lost their right to reside in the village. A few days later, the civil authorities of the district of Pinh, where the village is located, the Christians were threatened and were told that their homes would be seized and demolished if they do not stop to observe the Christian faith. Later, however, the head of Religious Affairs Office of the district of Pinh publicly declared in the village that residents are free to choose their religion, Christianity included.

Even in the village of Allowmai, close by, representatives of the local authorities are trying to force Christians to participate in traditional animist rites and to abandon the Christian faith. Police officials have said that if Christians do not abjure their faith, the detention of three Christian leaders Bountert, Adang and Onkaew arrested in recent weeks (see Fides 29/09/2012) will be prolonged. Same goes in Kengsayai, another village in the same district: about 31 Christian families (about 155 people) and more than 70 non-Christians families were asked to carry out a ritual according to the old "cult of the spirits", or risk losing the right to residing in the village. Fides sources comment: "In the Year of Faith, the small Christian community in Laos is called to bravely endure and retain their faith, even among harassment and persecution." In Laos Christians are a total of 2.9% of the population (6.5 million inhabitants), including 2% Protestants and 0.9% Catholics. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 22/10/2012)