



ASIA/VIET NAM - Christian leader who died in prison: a victim of beatings, the faithful do not believe in suicide

Dak Nong (Agenzia Fides) – There are suspicions concerning the death of the Christian leader of the Vietnamese Evangelical Church Hoang Van Ngai (also known as Vam Ngaij Vaj), who died on March 17 while he was in police custody in the district of Dak Glong, province of Dak Nong. As learned by Fides Agency, the official version provided by the agents is "suicide through electric shock" that the victim's family strongly objects, stating that the man died as a result of beatings and torture.

According to family members, Ngai's wife and sister-in-law had been arrested on March 14, for reasons still unclear, without any arrest warrant. Ngai and his elder brother Hoang Van Pa had ended up in jail the next day and were being held in adjacent cells. At 3:00 am on March 17, Ngai's brother heard rumors of violent beating from his brother's cell. When the police took Ngai out of his cell, "he was completely lifeless, as if he was dead, with purple marks on his throat," says his brother, an eyewitness. The next day, the police announced the death, saying that the man had "voluntarily put his fingers in an electrical socket."

As reported to Fides by the NGO "Christian Solidarity Worldwide" (CSW), Ngai, aged 38, belonged to a Christian denomination legally recognized in the country, "the Evangelical Church of South Vietnam," and is of the Hmong ethnic group, known to be unpopular to Vietnamese authorities. Fides sources remember him as "a courageous and compassionate person who helped the needy." Ngai had enemies among government officials, because he had repeatedly raised his voice against abuse of power and had refused to pay bribes.

His family strongly reject the suicide theory, pointing out that over 300 witnesses saw Ngai's body "with bruises, deep cuts and broken skull", and family members did not know that the autopsy had been carried out. This is why a letter to the Chief of Police of Dak Nong was presented, demanding a thorough investigation of the case and punishment for those responsible for the beating. According to CSW "the victim may have died as a result of torture while in police custody. We urge for a serious investigation and measures to guarantee the right to religious freedom, in order to prevent further violations against believers." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 11/04/2013)