

Vietnamese Catholics protest clergy beatings, arrests of marchers

WASHINGTON – Thousands of Catholics marched on Vietnamese streets July 26 to protest the beating of two Catholic priests and the detainment of seven Catholics after a violent police raid at a disputed church site.

In a series of coordinated marches throughout the Vinh Diocese, about 500,000 people gathered to demand the release of the seven marchers who were arrested July 20 at the site of Tam Toa, a parish destroyed by U.S. bombers during the Vietnam War, and to call for an end of police attacks on Catholics, according to news reports.

The seven Catholics were taken into custody after trying to erect a cross and other religious symbols at the ruins of the church, reports said.

The government maintains that the Tam Toa church is national property and was dedicated as a war memorial in the late 1990s.

Auxiliary Bishop Dominic M. Luong of the Diocese of Orange, Calif., the sister diocese of the Archdiocese of Hanoi in Vietnam, said the Vietnamese government never introduced such a law.

“They make the laws as they go along and suppress the people,” Bishop Luong, the only Vietnamese-born bishop in the U.S., said in an interview with Catholic News Service July 29. “It’s very unreasonable.”

News reports said the seven were involved in a scuffle with police and local residents before they were taken away.

Two priests were beaten July 26 in the central city of Dong Hoi, about 310 miles south of Hanoi, in the Vinh Diocese. Both were hospitalized in critical condition.

Reports said one priest, Father Paul Nguyen Dinh Phu, was traveling to a march at Tam Toa when he was attacked by police. The second, Father Peter Nguyen The

Binh, pastor of a parish near Dong Hoi, was attacked hours later when he tried to visit his fellow cleric in the hospital. Reports said he was surrounded by a crowd, beaten and thrown from a second-floor window at the facility.

Elsewhere, reports said, more than 2,000 Catholics attended a prayer vigil July 27 at the Redemptorist monastery in Ho Chi Minh City to call attention to government persecution of the Catholic Church and its followers.

Bishop Luong said Vietnamese people worldwide have been holding prayer vigils and processions for the victims.

“All the Vietnamese are behind them - not only Catholics, but all the other denominations,” he said. “The only thing we have is to wait and pray and be patient.”