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## Catholics assert themselves in Hanoi land dispute

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HANOI, Vietnam -- At a vacant lot in downtown Hanoi, Catholics have gathered to worship the Virgin Mary \_ and pressure the communist authorities.

For the second time this year, the city's Catholics have taken the extraordinary step of occupying state-controlled land that once belonged to the church. Their gatherings are putting pressure on a government eager to project religious tolerance but determined to maintain political control and public order.

Hundreds of Catholics have been holding daily prayer vigils since Aug. 15 to demand the return of the plot next to the Thai Ha Church. They broke through the brick wall surrounding the weed-covered, rubble-strewn site and installed a 15-foot-tall crucifix, dozens of statues of the Virgin Mary and hundreds of bamboo crosses.

City officials have pleaded with them to leave, but the crowds grew last week after rumors circulated that the Virgin Mary herself had come to lend her support.

In the decades after Vietnam's communists took power in 1954, the church was tightly controlled and public demonstrations were banned. But in recent years, religious freedom has increased gradually and the government has grown more tolerant of land protests by farmers and others.

These changes are part of a broader evolution that began in the 1990s and have accelerated as Vietnam has opened to foreign investment. Greater personal liberty has followed, with consumers gaining access to everything from CNN to Gucci to the World Wide Web.

Earlier this year, Catholics held prayer vigils next to St. Joseph's Cathedral, Hanoi's biggest church, to demand the return of land where the Vatican Embassy stood until the communists severed relations with the church in Rome.

Those demonstrations ended after authorities agreed to discuss the church's claim if the demonstrators halted their vigils.

"The talks are moving very slowly, and there has not been much progress," Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet told The Associated Press in an interview Thursday.

The land at Thai Ha is 17,000 square yards \_ roughly the size of two American football fields. The protesters began their vigils after they saw potential buyers scouting the land and heard a rumor that the city planned to sell the site, worth millions of dollars, to a property developer to build 28 residential and commercial lots.

After the vigils began, the government announced that it planned to turn the site into a public park. It views the demonstrators as vandals and trespassers, and has launched a campaign of denunciation in the state-owned media.

"A number of parishioners and some priests have ignored public opinion and belittled the rule of law," wrote the New Hanoi newspaper. It accused the Thai Ha priests of hatching "wicked plots."

Tensions increased last month after parishioners and two priests said dozens of police used stun guns and clubs to disperse a crowd of nearly 300 that had gathered outside a police station near the disputed land. City officials deny the charge.

"I am very upset that the police used violence to interfere with the prayer of Catholics," Kiet said. "Their vigils are very peaceful. We don't want to overthrow the authorities."

The archbishop said the vigils are grassroots initiatives not organized by the Hanoi diocese, but he supports them. "The Thai Ha parish has official ownership of that land," he said.

He acknowledged that Hanoi has increased religious freedom in recent years, but less than he would like.

Senior government officials have grown more supportive, and pressure has been applied by the international community and Vietnamese Catholics, who have grown increasingly assertive, Kiet said.

With more than 6 million followers, Catholicism is the second largest religion after Buddhism in the nation of 84 million.

Land ownership rules are complex in Vietnam, where the government controls all property.

After the communists ousted the French colonial regime, they seized land from wealthy property owners, including the Catholic church, and distributed it to those who fought in the revolution.

The church claims it has documents verifying its claim to the Thai Ha land. The city claims a former parish priest signed papers turning the property over to Hanoi in 1962.

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