

Countries of Particular Concern: Vietnam

Already poor religious freedom conditions had deteriorated significantly in the last 18 months. During that time, key religious dissidents have been imprisoned; some remain in prison or under house arrest. In addition, the government continued its crackdown on religious minorities in the northwestern provinces and Central Highlands. Abuses included harassment and surveillance, forced church closings, and renunciations of faith. These abuses are authorized at the highest levels of the Vietnamese government, according to documents obtained by human rights and non-governmental organizations.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) is currently facing the worst period of repression since it was banned in 1981. Despite promises by Prime Minister Pham Van Khai in March 2003 that arrests would decrease, 26 of the UBCV's leaders continue to be detained under house arrest, including its founders, the Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang and the Very Venerable Thich Quang Do. There is concern for Thich Huyen Quang's failing health and access to medical care while under detention.

The Vietnamese government has also broadened its campaign of harassing Christians among its ethnic minority population. According to documents smuggled out of Vietnam, Hmong Christians in the far northwest provinces of Vietnam are still being pressured to renounce their faith. The documents allege that government officials with the Ministry of Public Security have entered places of worship, denounced believers, and forced them to sign confessions and take part in traditional animist rituals. If they refuse, they face harassment, beatings, imprisonment, or loss of access to government services. For example, in August 2002, a Hmong Protestant in Lai Chau province reportedly died after being beaten several times by Vietnamese officials who attempted to force him to renounce his faith. In December 2002, officials in the same province reportedly used noxious gas to attack Hmong Christians during a house church worship service. Persons who were found to have provided religious training and literature to ethnic minorities have in the past been arrested and imprisoned.

Significant numbers of religious adherents are in prisons or under some form of detention, including house arrest. A Hoa Hao Buddhist organization in the United States states that 18 Hoa Hao Buddhists are reportedly in some form of detention, including Le Quan Liem. Twenty Hmong Protestants are reportedly in prison, along with dozens of Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands, both groups having been detained in connection with the government's crackdown on religious minorities in 2001. There are at least 10 Catholic priests and lay adherents still imprisoned, including Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, who was detained after he submitted testimony to the Commission. Fr. Ly's prison sentence was reduced by five years in June 2003. His niece and nephews, however, were sentenced in September 2003 to between 3-5 years in prison for passing information to human rights organizations about their uncle's arrest.

Vietnamese government officials arrest and detain individuals for engaging in "illegal religious activities." Unofficial house church Protestants and ethnic minority Protestants are two groups most subject to this type of harassment. For example, Montagnard Protestants in the Central Highlands have been detained or imprisoned for engaging in religious and other independent activities that are not permitted by government authorities.

These particularly severe violation of religious freedom have taken place as the government continues to control and place restrictions on all religious groups, registered or otherwise. Communist party and government officials also interfere in the internal affairs of organized religious communities. For example, the government places restrictions on Roman Catholics by imposing limits on the number of candidates allowed to study for the priesthood. In addition, the government controls the appointment and assignments of Catholic clergy and also plays an active role in the selection of the bishops, effectively vetoing those papal appointments of which it disapproves.

The Constitution of Vietnam, along with a 1999 decree on religious activities, permit extensive government control over and interference in religious worship, education, publishing, leadership, charitable activities, and church building.

In addition to recommending that Vietnam be designated a country of particular concern, or CPC, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should:

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make clear to the government of Vietnam that ending violations of religious freedom is essential to the continued expansion of U.S.-Vietnam relations, urging the Vietnamese government to:

- halt the arrest, detention, imprisonment, and intimidating surveillance of persons on account of their manifestation of religion or belief, including members of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and the northwestern provinces;

- cease bans on religious gatherings in ethnic minority areas, and permit religious groups to gather for observances of significant religious holidays; and

- repeal the 1999 Administrative Decree on Religion and ensure that any new law on religion meets international standards;

- cease practices that coerce individuals to renounce any religion or belief;

- withhold its support for loans to Vietnam from international financial institutions, except those providing for basic human needs, until the government of Vietnam agrees to make substantial improvements in the protection of religious freedom;

- urge the Vietnamese government to provide U.S. and other foreign government officials, human rights and humanitarian groups, international organizations, and journalists regular and unhindered access to members of all religious communities in Vietnam, particularly those in the Central Highlands and the northwestern provinces; and

- overcome the jamming of Radio Free Asia broadcasts and support, through U.S. assistance and exchange programs, including the Vietnam Education Foundation, individuals in Vietnam who advocate religious freedom, the rule of law, and legal reform.

In addition, the U.S. Congress should pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act of 2003 and, in conjunction with the Commission, review Vietnam's human rights practices, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, as a part of the annual Congressional review of the Jackson-Vanik waiver for Vietnam.