

## March 31, 2000: Commission Condemns Vietnam's Interference in Buddhist Commemoration

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today condemned the government of Vietnam's actions in preventing Hoa Hao Buddhists from freely assembling to commemorate one of the holiest days of their calendar.

"Such interference by the authorities with a peaceful religious group's celebration of one of its holy days is totally unwarranted and a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," said Rabbi David Saperstein, the Commission's chairman. "It's past time for the Hanoi government to respect its own constitution, fulfill its international obligations, and stop such repression of religion."

The Commission had earlier written to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to request that the State Department closely monitor the situation. "We have been assured that they did so," Chairman Saperstein said.

Some of the 2 million to 4 million Hoa Hao Buddhist practitioners tried to assemble March 29 and 30 on their "sacred ground" in Hoa Hao village (their founder's birthplace), in Chau Doc Province in the Mekong Delta. Vietnamese authorities, however, forcibly prevented any of the faithful from entering the grounds. According to reliable reports reaching the Commission, key leaders were arrested or their houses were surrounded by police. Other devotees were threatened or detained on their way to the site. Eventually only about 1,000 people made it to Hoa Hao village, where a phalanx of police met them.

By comparison, last year about 300,000 adherents were able to evade police and assemble for the movement's 60th anniversary. In that case, the government ultimately authorized the gathering, but as a one-time event. The government last year also hand-picked a tightly controlled Hoa Hao committee - the first in 25 years - but authorities continue to restrict public gatherings and distribution of the community's scriptures. Permission this year for Hoa Hao practitioners to gather at the site and pray for the return of Master Huynh Phu So, their founder, was denied.

The Hoa Hao movement emphasizes the importance of home worship and opposes the use of temples or pagodas for devotion. They reject ceremonial "extravagance" such as statues, gongs, and burnt offerings and are strong advocates of assisting the poor. With a long history of anticommunism, they have suffered severe repression since 1975, when the Communists assumed control in the south.

"The Vietnamese authorities must understand that their treatment of Hoa Hao Buddhists and other religious groups is being closely watched," Saperstein said. "Their interests and the nation's would be better served by allowing religious groups to practice freely. That includes the right of the Hoa Hao to assemble for religious celebrations."

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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