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The U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam meets with dissidents to discuss human rights and religious freedom. The U.S. ambassador to Vietnam has held rare talks with two local prominent dissidents—the head of a banned Buddhist group under de facto house arrest and a prodemocracy activist—in an apparent bid to highlight religious freedom and prodemocracy activism in the country. Ambassador David Shear met separately on Friday in Ho Chi Minh City with Thich Quang Do, the octogenarian head of the unsanctioned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), and activist Nguyen Dan Que, a former political prisoner.

Two UBCV monks in central Vietnam's Danang were beaten the same day of the meetings, according to the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB), which represents UBCV abroad.

UBCV patriarch Do, 83, who is confined under constant surveillance at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery, spoke with Shear about repression against the group, which has clashed with authorities since its founding in the 1960s.

He called on the ambassador to pay attention to unsanctioned religious groups like UBCV in Vietnam, where religious activity is closely monitored and religious groups must operate under government-controlled management boards, according to IBIB.

Do expressed his concern to Shear that the U.S. underestimates the level of authorities' harassment and intimidation of UBCV members, IBIB said.

South China Sea

Do also called on the U.S. to help Hanoi defend its territorial claims against Beijing in the South China Sea, an issue many of Vietnam's dissidents have been detained or harassed for speaking out about.

"The ambassador agrees with me that no country other than the U.S. has the ability to confront China's aggressiveness. In fact, American help to Vietnam is also of benefit to the U.S.'s own freedom of navigation in the East Sea," he said in an interview Monday, using the Vietnamese term for the South China Sea.

Hundreds of protesters have taken part in weekly anti-China demonstrations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, calling for the government to do more about China's alleged aggression in the region.

Vietnamese authorities have often allowed the demonstrations to take place, but detain or harass participants afterwards.

Fearing Do and UBCV followers will join the protests, police regularly hold the head monk inside the monastery on the Sundays when there are demonstrations, according to IBIB.

#### Prodemocracy activism

After meeting with Do, Shear visited the home of Que, a former physician who has spent a total of over two decades either in prison or under house arrest for his activism since 1978.

The website of the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi said Shear "discusse[d] human rights and religious freedom" with the two dissidents.

It posted photos of the visits by Shear, who was accused in July by a U.S. congressman for not speaking out strongly enough on human rights abuses in Vietnam.

Que, 70, said the two discussed the ambassador's commitment to supporting human rights in Vietnam, IBIB said.

"The ambassador informed me about what he himself and the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi have done for improving human rights and democracy in Vietnam in the past year. He emphasized that U.S. policy is consistent that economic and military cooperation must go hand in hand with human rights and democracy improvement," Que said.

Que, who founded the Non-Violent Movement for Human Rights, has often spoken out about the need for democracy and human rights accountability in the country.

"I told [Shear] that his visit to my house is not only an honor for me but also a great inspiration for other activists and a significant boost for the Non-Violent Movement for Human Rights and democracy in Vietnam."

He also updated Shear on the current situation for Vietnam's political prisoners, he said.

Buddhists beaten

Meanwhile on Friday, two UBCV members were beaten outside the Giac Minh Pagoda, a temple belonging to the group in central Vietnam's Danang city, by youths they believe were plainclothes police working with the authorities, IBIB said.

The youths stopped Le Cong Cau, a leader of the UBCV Buddhist Youth Movement, when he was about to enter the temple and told him not to go there, and then also beat monk Thich Thanh Quang who came to help him, the group said.

After youths beat the two outside the pagoda, two uniformed security police came to the scene and ordered the two UBCV members to go to the police station, IBIB said.

## Human rights

Washington has also recently taken steps to back off of earlier criticism of Hanoi's rights record.

In September last year, the U.S. State Department did not include Vietnam in its annual "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPC) blacklist of top violators of religious freedom, as demanded by rights groups.

The 2012 list of CPCs is yet to be announced by the State Department, but the independent **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**, a congressional watchdog, recommended Vietnam be put on the list this year, saying the communist government there severely restricts religious practice and "brutally" represses those who challenge its authority.

During their meeting Do gave Shear a memorandum documenting authorities' harassment and intimidation of UBCV members and saying that the State Department's most recent annual report did not fully reflect the level of harassment the group was subjected to, IBIB said.

"Whilst appreciating the 2011 State Department's report of abuses against the UBCV, we are concerned that they portray but a pale picture of the systematic police pressures, harassment, and intimidation faced by UBCV Buddhists in every aspect of their daily lives," Do said in the memo, according to IBIB.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact Samantha Schnitzer at [sschnitzer@uscirf.gov](mailto:sschnitzer@uscirf.gov) or (202) 786-0613.

