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Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion 'deeply flawed'

By Imogen Faux

World Watch Monitor (06.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2h5v0Lw> - Vietnam's National Assembly finally ratified (on 18 Nov.) its Law on Belief and Religion amid extensive criticism from parliamentarians, human rights and religious groups, who deem it to be below international standards for human rights.

The Vietnamese government says that the law, the first of its kind in the socialist republic, will optimise the administration of religious affairs, reported UCA News. But rights groups and lawmakers fear this to be a move to restrict religious freedoms rather than protect them.

The law has been widely criticised throughout the lengthy drafting process, with some 50 civil society organisations, including Amnesty International and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, joining their voices with ASEAN Parliamentarians to denounce the nine-chapter-long draft law earlier this year.

In an open letter to the Vietnamese government prior to the ratification of the law, the group of organisations and lawmakers rejected a clause stating that religious groups must be registered and approved by the government in order to practise. The letter condemned this as "excessive state interference in religious organisations' internal affairs".

The letter also criticised the law for "vague" wording which, if interpreted flexibly, could potentially be used to ensnare religious groups or individuals. A separate statement issued by Human Rights Watch highlighted particular examples of elusive phrasing, found in clauses prohibiting the use of religion to undermine "national security", "national unity" and "public order".

According to the national radio station, Voice of Vietnam, "religious dignitaries told the National Assembly that the approval of the law was a turning point in Vietnam's religious policy, which encourages religious followers to promote the values of religions and patriotism and combat hostile forces' intention to sabotage socialism".

The law has been in the pipeline for over a year, and went through numerous amendments before being ratified in November. Opponents to the law acknowledge that some improvements have been made since the first draft was published on the National Assembly website last year. But a statement published by the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) the day after its ratification described it as still "deeply flawed". The final details of the law, which will come into effect in January 2018, were not released to the public at the time of its ratification by 84.58 per cent of the Assembly's vote.

However, VCHR's Executive Secretary Vo Tran Nhat, who analysed the later drafts of the law, told World Watch Monitor in April that, in his view, the new law is designed to "repress and control".

Thomas Muller, an analyst for Open Doors, which works with minority Christians under pressure around the world, says the imminent legislation could leave Christian groups vulnerable. Already ranked twentieth on Open Doors' 2016 World Watch List of restrictive countries for Christians, Muller predicts that in Vietnam it will become increasingly difficult for Christians to register their churches and operate freely.

"Whereas there are a few sections in which the new law can be considered to be an improvement for Christians, the regulations on registration in particular will definitely cause churches great difficulties," he said. "The broad notion of the term 'foreign' may well lead to arbitrary interpretations and actions by the state. It is particularly interesting to see that ASEAN lawmakers have also criticised the new law. Since it is highly unusual that ASEAN publically criticises another member country, this will certainly give the authorities in Vietnam something to think about."

A US State Department report on religious freedom, published in August, noted "significant improvement" in the state of religious freedom in Southeast Asia. Certainly in Vietnam repressive restrictions have slackened off since 1975, when war between North and South Vietnam ended. But in a climate where legislation, policing and surveillance of religious activities have, to a greater or lesser extent, been the norm in government practice for decades, the new law looks unlikely to make the practice of religion any easier.

Vietnam new law contravenes the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief

VCHR (19.11.2016) - The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) strongly denounces the adoption of a new Law on Belief and Religion by Vietnam's 14th National Assembly on Friday 18 November at the end of its second session. VCHR believes that the law, which replaces the current Ordinance 22 on Belief and Religion and various other decrees and regulations, is deeply flawed. It enables the communist authorities to interfere intrusively in all aspects of religious life and grossly contravenes the rights enshrined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

"This is the first time Vietnam has adopted a law on religions, and it was an important opportunity to improve its people's rights" said VCHR President Võ Văn Ái. "But instead of adopting legislation to protect and promote the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief as in most civilized countries, Vietnam is once again using the law to increase state

control, criminalize independent religious activities and give the authorities a cloak of legality to continue harassing, arresting and convicting its citizens at will”.

Under the new law, registration remains mandatory, although the process is now accelerated (it will take 5 years instead of 23 years to obtain state recognition), and makes no provisions for religious groups who cannot, or choose not to register with the state, such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Mandatory registration is a violation of Article 18 of the ICCPR, as UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, stressed after his visit to Vietnam: “the right to freedom of religion or belief is a universal right which can never be “created” by administrative procedures. Rather, it is the other way around: registration should be an offer by the State but not a compulsory legal requirement”.

“Advocates of freedom of religion or belief risk imprisonment under the vaguely-worded “prohibited acts” cited in this law” said VCHR President Võ Văn Ái. He cited the case of UBCV Patriarch Thích Quảng Độ, who is under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon after decades of arbitrary detention for his advocacy of religious freedom and human rights. “Vietnam acceded to the ICCPR over 30 years ago, but it continues to flagrantly violate its citizens’ rights, in violation of its binding international obligations”.

Unusually, whereas most laws come into force some months after their adoption, the Law on Belief and Religion will not come into force until 1st January 2018.

In October, in an initiative launched by VCHR and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 54 religious bodies and civil society organizations sent a letter to National Assembly President Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân, calling for an urgent revision of the draft law before it came up for vote.

Open Letter to the President of the Vietnam National Assembly on Vietnam’s draft Law on Belief and Religion

The Hon. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan
President, National Assembly of Vietnam
Doc Lap Street, Quan Thanh
Ba Dinh, Hanoi

Dear National Assembly President Nguyen Kim Ngân,

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, are writing to express our concerns about the proposed Law on Belief and Religion in Vietnam. The draft law, which has been revised several times and drawn strong criticism from many religious communities, is expected to be voted into law by the National Assembly at its session in October/November 2016.

The most recent draft was discussed at a high-level meeting of the Communist Party’s Fatherland Front on 17 August, and circulated to certain religious communities for comment. An examination of the draft law that was published on the National Assembly website shows that the 9-chapter draft law contains some improvements, but also continues to place unacceptable restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. Specifically, basic guarantees of the right to freedom of religion or belief continue to be undermined by onerous registration requirements and excessive state interference in religious organizations’ internal affairs. Indeed, this and the previous versions of the law inherit from previous rules and regulations this emphasis on

government control and management of religious life which is contrary to the spirit and principle of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

As mentioned above, the draft was circulated to certain religious communities for comment. However, one Catholic body also objected to the short time, from 18 to 30 August, given for preparing their response to the draft law.(1)

Furthermore, independent religious groups not registered with the government, such as the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, were not consulted.

There have been some welcome improvements made in the draft law, including provisions for the right to change one's religion, as well as to follow or not follow a religion, the right of some detainees "to use religious books and manifest their belief or religion", and the right of religious organizations to participate in activities such as education, vocational training, medical care and social and humanitarian assistance.

Nevertheless, the recommendations below have emerged from some of the particular concerns expressed by religious communities in Vietnam, which are shared by the undersigned organisations.

1. The definition of a religion should be made consistent with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In the current draft, a religious organization has been defined as "a group of people ... which is recognized by the government" (our emphasis) (Article 2.13). This leaves members of religious organizations who cannot or choose not to register with the authorities in a legal limbo, with no legal safeguards for conducting religious activities.

2. Registration with the government should not be made a pre-requisite for the exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

The onerous and complex registration process requires approval from the authorities for religious activities, operations and status as an organization. The guarantees outlined in Article 18 of the ICCPR are independent of and cannot be conditioned on any domestic process of notification, authorisation, recognition or registration.

3. The law must not allow officials to arbitrarily interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations.

Provisions in the law allow the authorities to interfere excessively in the internal decisions, appointments, training, teachings and programmes of religious organisations. Limitations on the manifestation of freedom of religion or belief must never exceed in either purpose or scope those permitted in article 18(3) of the ICCPR. As the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, said after his visit to Vietnam in 2014, "...registration should be an offer by the State but not a compulsory legal requirement."

4. Ambiguous and potentially discriminatory language should be removed.

The draft law contains ambiguous language regarding "good traditional cultural values" (Article 10.1) and "sowing division" (Article 5.4), that could be used to discriminate against ethnic and indigenous minorities, independent groups and those whose religion or belief is seen as "foreign" (Article 2.12).

5. Provisions should be made to establish legal channels and mechanisms for people to file complaints, and have those complaints independently

investigated and acted on, in cases of alleged violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

For these reasons, we strongly urge that the law be revised, in consultation with religious community representatives, including those of non-recognized religious communities, and experts in international human rights law, to ensure that the law protects the right to freedom of religion or belief in line with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We look forward to hearing from you about this important matter. Please reply to the VCHR coordinator Penelope Faulkner at penelope.faulkner@gmail.com or the CSW coordinator Benedict Rogers at benrogers@csw.org.uk.

Sincerely yours,

54 signatories
Human Rights Without Frontiers was one of them.

(1) Letter On Behalf of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Vietnam, signed by Bishop Peter Nguyen Van Kham, Deputy Secretary-general <http://bit.ly/2eYvB5v>

54 Religious organisations and CSOs call on Vietnam National Assembly to revise Draft Law on Religion and Belief

VCHR (06.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2g9vQa3> - 54 prominent religious and civil society organisations in Vietnam, the USA, Europe and Asia have sent an Open Letter to the President of Vietnam's National Assembly, Ms. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, calling for the revision of the Draft Law on Belief and Religion which should be voted by the National Assembly at their upcoming session (20 October - 18 November 2016). The signatories say the law is seriously flawed, and call for a revised text to be drafted in consultation with religious organisations and international legal experts "to ensure that the law protects the right to freedom of religion or belief in line with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)".

"This law, if adopted in its current form, will put a straight-jacket on religions" said VCHR President Vo Van Ai, one of the letters' co-sponsors. "It legalises government interference into all aspects of religious life, and rejects the very existence of organisations which cannot, or do not want to register with the State. This is against the very principle of freedom of religion or belief enshrined in the ICCPR, to which Vietnam is a state party".

According to the signatories, the draft law places "unacceptable restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights", and "inherit[s] from previous rules and regulations this emphasis on government control and management of religious life which is contrary to the spirit and principle of the right to freedom of religion and belief".

This is the first time Vietnam will adopt a law on religion and belief. Until now, religions have been regulated by a series of ordinances and decrees. Previous versions of the draft, which were circulated to religious communities for comment by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, sparked off strongly critical reactions. However, the current text has taken no account of the religious communities' concerns. Moreover, apart from the Catholic Church, which has a special status in Vietnam, only State-

recognised or State-sponsored religious bodies were consulted, not independent organisations such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and non-recognised Christian, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Khmer Krom Buddhist communities.

UN experts urge Viet Nam to stop the persecution and torture of religious leaders and rights defenders

UN (02.06.2016) – Two United Nations human rights experts today called on the Government of Viet Nam to stop the persecution of Ms. Tran Thi Hong, who has been repeatedly arrested and tortured as retaliation for informing the international community of human rights violations against her husband, who is in prison for peaceful religious activities.

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, and the Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez, also urged the Vietnamese authorities to put an end to all persecution and harassment, including criminalization, against religious leaders and human rights defenders, women rights defenders and members of their families.

Ms. Tran, spouse of imprisoned Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, was initially arrested on 14 April 2016. She was tortured and warned to stop her activities promoting freedom of religion. Since then, Ms. Tran Thi Hong has been repeatedly arrested and harassed by the authorities, who are trying to force her to 'cooperate' with the Government.

"We are concerned that the repeated arrests and the continuing detention of Ms. Tran resulted from her peaceful human rights work and exercise of her fundamental rights, which constitutes arbitrary detention," the experts said calling for her unconditional release.

Her husband, has been in prison since 2011 for his religious activities as director of the Vietnam-U.S. Lutheran Alliance Church, which is considered as 'anti-Government' and 'anti-communist' by the authorities. In prison, he has been subjected to torture and deprived of contact with his family.

"The Vietnamese Government has the obligation to respect the right of religious communities to organize themselves as independent communities and to appoint their own leaders," said Special Rapporteur Bielefeldt.

"The severe beating, by authorities who did not identify themselves, amounts to torture and must be investigated and those responsible held accountable, in accordance with Viet Nam's international human rights obligations," Mr. Méndez, added.

The UN Special Rapporteurs stressed that "Viet Nam should release Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and Ms. Tran Thi Hong, as well as all persons detained for their legitimate activities in the defence of human rights."

The human rights experts' appeal has also been endorsed by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mr. Michel Forst; the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Mr. Maina Kiai; the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović; and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

Mr. Heiner Bielefeldt (Germany) assumed his mandate in August 2010. Mr. Bielefeldt is Professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Politics at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. From 2003 to 2009, he was Director of Germany's National Human Rights Institution. The Special Rapporteur's research interests include various interdisciplinary

facets of human rights theory and practice, with a focus on freedom of religion or belief. Learn more, log on to: <http://bit.ly/1PQaaPf>

Mr. Juan E. Méndez (Argentina) was appointed by the UN Human Rights Council as the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in November 2010. He has dedicated his legal career to the defense of human rights, and has a long and distinguished record of advocacy throughout the Americas. Learn more, log on to: <http://bit.ly/1AbW8eR>

The Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity. Learn more, log on to: <http://bit.ly/1tpUs2V>

OHCHR Country Page – Viet Nam: <http://bit.ly/28KcNyW>

For further information and **media requests**, please contact Mr. Jon Izagirre (+41 22 91 79715 / jizagirre@ohchr.org)

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Who is Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh?

Prior to his arrest in 2011, Nguyen Cong Chinh was an outspoken Protestant pastor, religious freedom activist, and democracy campaigner who had a long history of conflict with local officials.

Originally from Quang Nam, since 1985 he has lived in the Central Highlands provinces of Kon Tum and Gia Lai, where he has focused his ministry on ethnic minority highlanders. In January and September 2004 police used bulldozers to destroy Pastor Chinh's unregistered Mennonite chapel in Kon Tum, which doubled as his residence.

In 2006, Pastor Chinh founded the Vietnamese People's Evangelical Fellowship (VPEF), which focuses on charitable work in the highlands as well as assistance to minority prisoners and their families. In 2008 police summoned Pastor Chinh for daily interrogation sessions for more than 50 days.

On April 28, 2011 Pastor Chinh was arrested at his home in Plei Ku, Gia Lai on charges of sabotaging the unity policy under Article 87. An article in the *People's Police* newspaper the following day stated that the provincial police security investigation agency had collected hundreds of files through "administrative inspection" of "self-proclaimed" Pastor Chinh since 2003 that showed he had allegedly colluded with foreign reactionaries, including exiled members of the former Montagnard resistance group known as FULRO, to conduct anti-government activities.

In particular, the article stated, he had collected information from websites of organizations such as Human Rights Watch and democracy groups based abroad, granted interviews to foreign media, and colluded with anti-government activists to falsely accuse Vietnam of suppressing religious freedom and call for its re-designation as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom violations.

In 2009 Pastor Chinh received the Vietnam Human Rights Award from the Vietnam Human Rights Network in the United States.

Vietnam grants official recognition to the LDS Church

By Sarah Jane Weaver

LDS Church News (02.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/25KiLvP> - During a historic ceremony on May 31, government leaders in Vietnam granted official recognition to the Church in Vietnam.

"On behalf of the leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members here in Vietnam and across the world, we express gratitude and appreciation for the official full recognition of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) and its Representative Committee in Vietnam," said Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles at the recognition event held in Hanoi, Vietnam, on May 31.

The historic event was attended by Mr. Bui Thanh Ha, Vice Chairman of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs; Honorable Le Ba Trinh, Vice President of the Fatherland Front; and other distinguished officials and friends of the Church. In addition to Elder Cook, Elder Gary E. Stevenson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Elder Gerrit W. Gong of the Presidency of the Seventy represented the Church at the event.

Elder Cook said Latter-day Saints "rejoice that 'an effectual door has been opened' (Doctrine and Covenants 112:19) for religious activities of the Latter-day Saint believers in Vietnam, under the laws of Vietnam."

"Many years ago, then-Elder Gordon B. Hinckley, accompanied by Elder Marion D. Hanks, pronounced an important blessing for Vietnam and its people. Elder Hinckley later spoke of 'a silver thread, small, but radiant with hope,' and 'his certain faith' in anticipation of this day," Elder Cook said.

The decision for "the recognition for the Representative Committee of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Vietnam," follows other recent milestones for the Church in the country.

Earlier this year, the Church created the Vietnam Hanoi Mission from the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission, which for several years has included Vietnamese-speaking representatives who serve in Vietnam. Often called branch builders in Vietnam, elders and sisters in the Vietnam Hanoi Mission are continuing to strengthen local members and branches.

At a Church invitation, a high-ranking Vietnam delegation from Hanoi, led by then-Chairman Pham Dung, visited Church headquarters in October of 2015. And earlier, in July 2015, the Church helped welcome H.E. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in Washington, D.C.

In 2014 Vietnam government leaders officially recognized an interim committee of Vietnamese Latter-day Saint leaders, giving them legal status to represent the Church in the country.

Over the years, the Church has also conducted a number of humanitarian activities in Vietnam through LDS Charities.

Elder Cook first met with the Vice Chairman and General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Fatherland Front and other senior Vietnamese leaders — including Mr. Ha and Mr. Trinh — in February of 2011.

“As the Vietnam press reported, I expressed appreciation for the attention of the Government and Vietnam Fatherland Front to the religious activities of the LDS Church in Vietnam. I introduced the history and development of the LDS Church. And I affirmed the LDS Church always obeys the laws of all nations and the law of Vietnam, promotes tolerance, harmony and social solidarity, family unity, while paying attention to social and charitable projects, and to the poor and the disadvantaged in many countries throughout the world.”

During the recognition event on May 31, Elder Stevenson said “there is much to be grateful for today.”

Church leaders are grateful for congregations that currently meet in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, according to the law, he added.

“Beyond Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, LDS Church followers live in several places across Vietnam,” he said. “According to the law and working closely with local Vietnam authorities, we look forward, gradually, over time, to establishing groups or branches for these additional Church members.”

Elder Gong said that some colleagues and friends during the event were also present in May 2014 when the Church and its Interim Representative Committee, chaired by Hanoi District President Hoang Van Tung, received recognition. “Thank you for today’s full official recognition.”

Elder Gong noted that the Church has followers in nearly every country and territory, and organized Church units in 188 of the world’s 224 countries and territories.

“In each country, we teach our LDS Church followers to honor, obey, and sustain the law and to exemplify the fine traditions and values that are shared by Vietnam and the LDS Church, such as respect for ancestors, commitment to family, education, honesty, diligent hard work, and service.

“I express again great appreciation for our friendship and deepening mutual understanding and respect, with a wish and prayer for your every health, happiness, and peace.”

Vietnam's Religion Law 'created to repress, control'

World Watch Monitor (28.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1XX0P9k> - Vietnam’s new “Law on Belief and Religion,” scheduled to come into effect this year, will add another layer of governmental repression and control to an already pressurised Church, says Vo Tran Nhat, Executive Secretary of the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights.

“They’re going to adopt a new law, a law on religion. This law is not a law on religion; it’s just a law on how to manage the control of religion,” he said in a video interview with World Watch Monitor.

Last year, Reg Reimer, a professor at the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, gave a thorough overview of the proposed law, saying “it is almost inevitable the new law will disappoint proponent of universal human rights”.

"The passing of this far-reaching new law on belief and religion ... will much more likely move the political system toward more micromanagement and control of religion, rather than toward more religious freedom as internationally understood," he said.

There have been five revisions to the draft of the new law, the latest being tabled in parliament in November 2015. No date has been set for when the law will come into effect; initial estimates suggested it may do so last year.

The new law will supersede the current decrees and ordinances on religion and cement their provisions. The current decrees were only a temporary measure; now they will be enshrined in law.

Vietnam is No. 20 on Open Doors' 2016 World Watch List, which ranks the 50 countries in which life as a Christian is most difficult.

Transcript of video

"Communism in Vietnam is like a religion, a secular religion. Vietnam is a one-party state, and Article 4 of the constitution gives all the power to the Communist party.

"The Communist party is very paranoid. In fact, historically, it always considered people who are not with [it] are against [it]. Before, it was for ideological reasons. Now, I think it's more a question just of power, money, etc., etc. All the organizations [that] are not Communist [are seen as] a threat.

"There is no religious freedom because the Communist regime tries to control everything in the religious life. The regime [has created] lots of other state-sponsored churches. There is unofficial and official, and unofficial churches are repressed. When you are recognized, it means you are under the control of the party and you can do nothing.

"We have several texts [decrees] on religion. The texts always say at the beginning: everybody has the right [to practise] religion, and you can believe, etc., etc. But in the other provisions, it always says you can't abuse your right of religion to infringe upon the interests of the state. It means that the Vietnamese authority gives people human rights, but at the same time it is taking back human rights. So, in fact, there is no human rights. You have a very visible repression against different religions, like the Christians.

"They're going to adopt a new law, a law on religion. This law is not a law on religion; it's just a law on how to manage the control of religion.

"The regime just says you have the freedom of religion [only] if you respect all the conditions of the party. It means, if you want to organize an event, you have to demand permission. If you want to create a church, you have to pass an exam, of several years – I think it's about 10 years, or 5 or 10 years. And if there is no problem, then you can have the [status] of recognized religion.

"The main philosophy of the text [the new proposed law on religion] is repression and control.

"In fact, in Vietnam, religions are the sole representatives of the civil society. It means that the Communist party just tolerates all the religions. They know that religion [is] essential for people, and, moreover, religion is quite interesting for tourism. In fact, in Vietnam, the authorities firstly authorize all the very beautiful religious ceremonies - it's very beautiful for tourists, so [they] bring money."

Security agents assault Hoa Hao Buddhists before temple ceremony

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (14.04.2016) - At least 14 Hoa Hao Buddhists in Vietnam, including one disabled person, were assaulted by security agents on 2 April as they marked the anniversary of the disappearance in 1947 of Hoa Hao Buddhism founder Huynh Phu So.

Three more attacks on members of the community reportedly took place in the days before and after 2 April.

Every year on 2 April, Hoa Hao Buddhists attempt to gather together at their places of worship for a remembrance ceremony. This year, Hoa Hao Buddhist followers in Dong Thap and An Giang provinces were followed and threatened by security agents from 30 March. Several were warned not to participate in the ceremony planned for 2 April at Quang Minh Temple while others were subjected to abusive language and had stones and rotten eggs thrown into their homes.

On 2 April, 13 Hoa Hao Buddhists came to the aid of religious leader Nguyen Van Lia, who was kicked and punched by unknown assailants on his way to the temple that morning. All 14 were then attacked by a large group of suspected security agents. One victim lost consciousness, while another, who is disabled, suffered a seizure as a result of the assault. Security agents would not allow him to be treated at a hospital. Later, a woman who held up a sign to protest the agents' actions was also attacked by security agents, who cut her neck with a knife.

According to the US State Department, Hoa Hao followers constitute 1.5 to 3 percent of the population in Vietnam. It is most widely practised in the Mekong Delta region. In 1999, the government established a council which was promoted as representing all Hoa Hao religious adherents; however, many followers do not recognise the legitimacy of the state-sanctioned council.

Independent or unregistered religious groups in Vietnam, including Christians, Buddhists and others, are frequently harassed and intimidated by the authorities and those who have spoken out about these incidents have been subject to further violations. More information can be found in Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)'s 2014 Vietnam report.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "We are deeply concerned by reports that Hoa Hao Buddhists in Vietnam have been violently attacked by security agents simply for attempting to gather together at their place of worship. After his 2014 visit to the country, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, expressed concern about the 'generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practising religions or beliefs that are not registered'. CSW believes that registration should not be a prerequisite for the exercise of the human right to freedom of religion or belief and condemns the pattern of violations against unregistered Christians, Buddhists and others in Vietnam. We urge the Vietnamese government to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for all".

Police attack Catholic church in Quang Binh, three parishioners injured

The incident occurred on 6 April. The pastor said police and soldiers fired shots near the church and used tear gas and batons against parishioners, before they tore down decorations from the site.

AsiaNews.it (08.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1TLsvAd> - Three Catholics were injured during in a clash with security forces in Houng Phuong, a village in Quang Binh province (central Vietnam), Radio Free Asia reported.

On Wednesday, police and soldiers fired bullets near the church and used tear gas and batons on the parishioners before tearing down decorations erected for an annual festival.

"It was noon time and most of the men were at work, so only old women and children were at home," local priest Fr Le Nam Cao told RFA.

"Parishioners told me of the crackdown. I told them that I would not go out and they should go home and just let them do whatever they wanted because we had no weapons, so it was not good for us."

Whilst Fr Le Nam Cao tried to convince his parishioners to stand down, some of them ignored his advice.

"Some people did not agree, so they fought back against the troops including policemen and soldiers who were well equipped with tear gas, bullets and batons," the priest said.

"This is not the first time authorities have clashed with church parishioners, but usually it comes in the form of individual harassment," Le Nam Cao explained.

"There were times they sent troops here to guard our village for two days. When they came here before they said they were searching for some drug dealers or something else. They did not say that they were cracking down on us. "

About 48 per cent of Vietnam's 87 million people is Buddhist, and 7 per cent is Catholic.

Although a small minority, Christians are particularly active in education, health and social affairs.

However, religious freedom has steadily eroded in recent years. Under Decree 92, more controls and restrictions have been imposed on religious practice, boosting the power of the Communist Party and the one-party state.

Buddhist Youth leader Lê Công Cầu faces expulsion for supporting Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam

VCHR (12.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1XmnEIW> - Security Police in the central city of Huế are preparing to forcibly expel Buddhist Youth leader Lê Công Cầu from his home because of his activities in support of the non-recognized Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV).

Lê Công Cầu informed the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) today that Security Police are forcing him to move out of the flat in 154 Phan Bội Châu Street, Huế,

where he has lived for the past 13 years. Over the past month, he has been subjected to threats, harassments and interrogations, Police have intimidated his landlord, and groups of hired thugs and plain-clothed security agents are threatening to throw his possessions into the street if he does not move out immediately.

In a recent "working session" (interrogation) at the Trường An District Police station on 9 March, Security Police told Lê Công Cầu they were expelling him (a) because of his support of the UBCV, which is considered an "illegal" organization, and (b) because, for the past two years, the Police had lost their status of "flag holder" in the government's "emulation campaign" because of his presence in their district. Losing this status not only means a loss of prestige, but also a cut in perks and privileges for the local Security Police.

"The Communist Party says that Security Police are "the servants of the people". Yet they regularly abuse their powers to intimidate and repress peaceful citizens", said VCHR President Võ Văn Ái. "Vietnam should cease harassment of Lê Công Cầu and all others who are simply urging the authorities to respect constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms and rights".

Lê Công Cầu reports that harassments began at the beginning of February, during the Lunar New Year. Police summoned his landlord and said he must terminate Lê Công Cầu's lease. The landlord was reluctant to do this, since Cầu regularly paid his rent and never caused any trouble. Police then increased pressure, subjecting the landlord to repeated "working sessions", and finally threatening to cut off the electricity and water in his building if he did not expel Lê Công Cầu.

Understanding his landlord's predicament, Lê Công Cầu looked for alternative accommodation. He found new lodgings, signed a contract and made a down payment. However, when the owner went to the Police to obtain the mandatory Temporary Residence Permit in the name of the new tenant, Lê Công Cầu, the Police refused. The same scenario occurred in five other places where flats were up to let. Wherever he went, his application was accepted, and then turned down. It became clear that Police had blacklisted Lê Công Cầu for residence in all the wards and districts in Huế.

In protest, Lê Công Cầu sent a letter on 7 March to the Huế provincial authorities and Security Police, with copy to VCHR President Võ Văn Ái, denouncing the Security Police's unlawful harassment as violations of Article 22 of the 2013 revised Constitution which guarantees that "the citizen has the right to have legal domicile: Everyone is entitled to the inviolability of his domicile" and Article 23 which enshrines the right to freedom of movement and residence. He demands the right to stay in his present lodgings. In his letter, Lê Công Cầu also said he had been subjected to "hundreds of interrogations" over the past years because of his support for the independent UBCV. He stressed that this repression would never induce him to renounce his engagement for the UBCV and its leader, Most Venerable Thich Quang Do.

The arbitrary treatment of Lê Công Cầu is typical of the systematic harassments, intimidation, surveillance, physical assaults and detention faced by all followers of "non-recognized" religious movements, human rights defenders, bloggers and activists in Vietnam. In recent years, to avoid international condemnation, Vietnam has avoided high-profile political trials, but stepped up beatings and harassments against dissidents.

"Vietnam holds a seat at the UN Human Rights Council and seeks to strengthen ties with the international community, yet at home it perpetuates a climate of fear aimed at stifling independent civil society voices", said Võ Văn Ái.

The VCHR has forwarded the case of Lê Công Cầu to the office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva.
