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Vietnam's religion policy and practice – contradictions continue

World Watch Monitor (23.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2zB5Wdp> - Optimists are hard to find ahead of Vietnam's impending introduction of its new Law on Belief and Religion, scheduled to come into effect on 1 January, 2018.

Vietnam's Catholic and Evangelical leaders, as well as Buddhists and Caodaists, say the main benefit of the law, two years in the making, will not be to religious freedom but rather to the government's control of religion.

So, in fact, the government's promise of institutionalising "religious freedom" differs little from the long series of directives, decrees, decisions, special instructions and ordinances that have been promulgated to govern religion since 1945.

Religion legislation will now be raised to the level of "law", and the penalty for each "administrative infraction" by religious believers (Article 64 of the law), from fines to force (maximum fine is \$ 1,300 US for an individual and double that for an organisation), is clearly defined in an accompanying penalty decree. As of 15 November, there is no parallel decree for government officials who violate the rights of religious believers (indicated by Article 65 of the law), nor are there instructions for believers to seek redress when their rights are violated (promised in Article 63).

On 3 November the Luật Khao Tap Chi (Law Journal) posted a 41-page landmark article by the self-described "Cell for the Study of Religion", called "Evaluating the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion and the Implementation of Freedom of Belief and Religion". The article

summarises four methods by which the communist state since its founding has sought to control religion:

1. **by "law" and administrative measures**
2. **by the propaganda machine**
3. **by "divide and rule" tactics**
4. **by brute force**

The emphasis on each of the four methods has changed from time to time in the past few decades, but all four still remain in use. The imminent implementation of the new law emphasises method one, but the penalty decree explicitly states the government will resort to method four, "force", if fines and additional measures do not achieve compliance.

The Law Journal article observes that religion was considered as adversarial, if not an outright enemy of the Party/State, until 2003 when it was officially acknowledged as "a need for some people".

"The penalty decree explicitly states the government will resort to force if fines and additional measures do not achieve compliance."

The Vietnam Conference of Catholic Bishops, in an open letter earlier this year, complained that the new law still retains the strong smell of treating Vietnam's religious believers as adversaries, second-class citizens to be treated with suspicion.

They asserted that their support for national development did not include support of the current government. Governments come and go, they said, and the government shouldn't mete out religious freedom in dribs and drabs. Religious freedom, they said, is universal and God-given.

Evangelical leaders say the law represents more intrusion into the internal affairs of their churches than any legislation heretofore. They regret that the new law will abrogate the benefits of the Prime Minister's Special Directive no.1 Concerning the Protestant Faith (2005), a directive sometimes used to grant permission for local congregations to operate, even while legal registration was pending or not available.

In the highly unlikely event that this new law will be evenly enforced according to the government's objectives, church leaders say it will be met with large-scale passive resistance.

Recent events and incidents illustrate the contradictions in Vietnam's religion policy and practice. On 2 and 3 November a consortium of around 50 'house church' organisations, the great majority of which are unregistered, was allowed to host a celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in Ho Chi Minh City. Some 5,000 house church leaders participated in day-time sessions featuring both foreign and overseas Vietnamese speakers.

Meanwhile, in the Central Highlands, where the government policy of containment of Christianity remains at work, strong anti-Christian activities continue. In one measure the government has tried to force Christians who meet in many smaller churches to consolidate into one large one, one per commune, and meet only once a week. This is highly restrictive and unacceptable to people without access to transportation and accustomed to several kinds of local church meetings throughout the week.

While the legally recognised Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) successfully resisted such consolidation in Binh Phuoc Province in a multi-year battle, members of the Dak Lak

provincial ECVN(S) committee apparently agreed to consolidate without the approval of the affected churches and most likely their superiors.

Also at stake were some cherished practices of the Ede minority churches. The ECVN(S) provincial committee agreed with the government that fasting and praying, prayer for healing of the sick and for casting out evil spirits were not to be practised. In this the ECVN(S) provincial committee appears to have buckled under government pressure, as these practices were historically observed by the ECVN(S).

"Evangelical leaders say the law represents more intrusion into the internal affairs of their churches than any legislation heretofore."

The affected congregations thought that a solution to this problem would be to join another denomination which did not have these restrictions. The fact that this new denomination had been deemed ineligible to register with the government gave the authorities another tool with which to beat the dissident congregations.

On 5 October three elders from one congregation were arrested at 5am and hauled to the village offices without being allowed to wash or dress properly. The authorities clearly feared community support for the arrested. After a brow beating for joining an "illegal" church, the arrested were taken to commune headquarters, where they were tortured for two and half days with the aim of making them return to the registered church.

In the 60-hour session supervised by the commune police chief, the men were allowed no sleep for the entire time and were deprived of water and food. They were regularly beaten around the head, so they became dizzy and could not compose themselves to answer their interrogators. At times, they said they feared for their lives.

They also implicated the provincial leaders of ECVN(S) in opening the door to the government abuse.

"Why do they hate us so? We believe in the same Jesus as they do," wrote one of the abused elders.

Meanwhile, a Love Hanoi Festival featuring American evangelist Franklin Graham is scheduled to be held in December in the capital. Organisers had been hoping for three nights (8-10 December) in the National My Dinh Stadium with 40,000 seats and had been working for a year in that direction. But very late in the process a "high politician" seems to have over-ruled government bureaucrats with an offer for two nights inside a 4,000-seat arena. This would not nearly accommodate the many thousands who have been mobilised to attend, and indicates once again that nothing in Vietnam is free or certain when it comes to religion.

Vietnam wrestles with Christianity

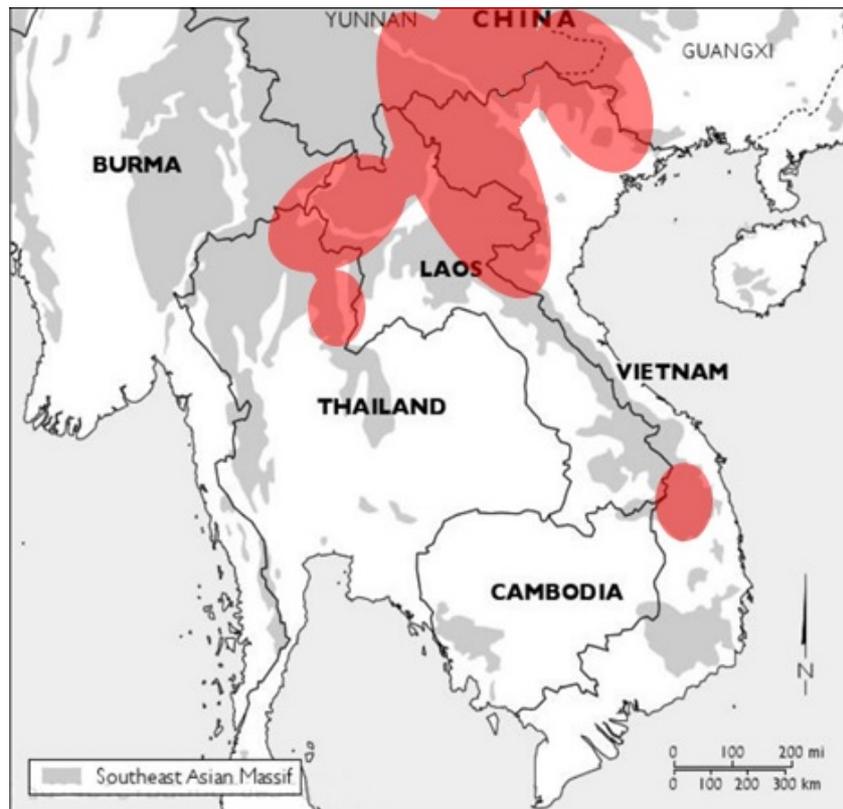
By Seb Rumsby



Christmas service among a Hmong congregation. Image by Seb Rumsby.

The Diplomat (13.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2Aey4Dd> - Upland Vietnam has witnessed a remarkable religious transformation within one marginalized ethnic minority in the past three decades. Since the 1980s, where Protestant Christianity was virtually unheard of in Vietnam's northern highlands, an estimated 300,000 out of the 1 million ethnic Hmong in Vietnam are now Christians. Over time, the social, economic, and political impacts of religious change – from persecution and migration to lifestyle changes and new gender relations – are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Today there are roughly 4 million Hmong speakers spread across the borderlands of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, plus significant diasporas in the United States and Australia. Their shared ethnic identity is built around speaking mutually intelligible languages and sharing the same clan surnames.



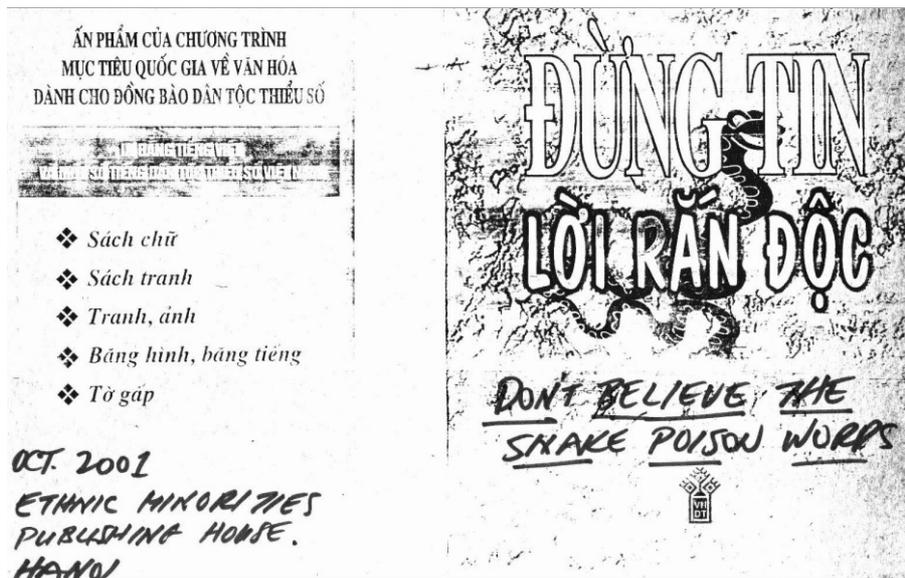
*A map of Hmong-inhabited areas of Southeast Asia. Adapted from Jodi L. Weinstein's *Empire and Identity in Guizhou: Local Resistance to Qing Expansion*, pp. vx © 2013.*

Somewhat akin to the Kurds of the Middle East, the Hmong are split into significant but marginalized national minorities. During the Cold War, the Hmong found themselves on

both sides of the conflict between communist and American forces, with the infamous anti-communist general Vang Pao being funded by the CIA in Laos.

Surprisingly, no foreign missionaries were physically present in Vietnam's highlands when Christianity started to spread in the late 1980s. Instead, villagers stumbled across a Hmong-language evangelistic radio program broadcast from Manila. Thrilled by hearing their own language on air, Hmong listeners told neighbors and relatives to tune in as the message spread like wildfire.

Vietnamese authorities reacted to Hmong Christian growth by denying its existence, publishing anti-Christian propaganda, and restricting religious freedom. With its history of struggle against Western imperialism, the government accused "hostile external forces" of promoting Christianity to undermine the people's faith in Communism and trigger social unrest along the strategically important Sino-Vietnamese borderlands.



Book cover entitled "Don't Believe the Snake Poison Words (referring to Christian teaching) published in Hanoi in 2001.

Human rights watchdogs report of converts being intimidated, arrested, fined, beaten, having property confiscated, and being forced to renounce their faith by local authorities. Many Hmong fled the persecution to Laos, Thailand, and other parts of Vietnam to seek a better life.

State religious repression has eased in recent years, although it is still very difficult for new churches to gain official recognition. Significant religious discrimination remains as Christians are denied university scholarships or access to civil service positions, often the only way of securing a regular income in rural areas.

The Hmong are at the bottom of Vietnam's ethnic hierarchy, with the highest poverty levels and lowest education levels. Due to their isolated location, the Hmong have not benefited from Vietnam's economic growth; local state-led development initiatives frequently achieve disappointing results due to ethnic prejudice and cultural misunderstandings.

However, some Hmong Christians are now able to access new sources of funding, information, and power through religious networks. For example, various Bible schools in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City allow ethnic minority students to study and live there for minimal fees.



Hmong students attending a church meeting in Hanoi. Image by Seb Rumsby.

Hmong students learn much more than theology as they are exposed to an urban environment with new ways of thinking and earning a living, which they bring back to their villages after graduating. Church leaders also network with foreign missionaries and organizations at Christian conferences, some of whom are eager to fund church buildings or poverty relief initiatives.

42-year-old Ban became the default church leader of his village when he was the first person to convert back in 1992; at present, around three-quarters of the village are Christian. After studying theology in China and Hanoi for many years, Ban has developed strong external networks and wields more influence than the officially designated village elder, due to his spiritual authority.

Over the past five years, Ban persuaded his fellow villagers to embark on some substantial collective endeavors that have transformed his village from an impoverished backwater to a thriving tourist destination: building five kilometers of concrete road down to the main road, establishing a weekly market from scratch, and taking responsibility for clearing litter from the land.

Every Saturday, there is a church meeting in which villagers discuss the best ways to grow cash crops or raise livestock, as well as ensuring discipline in collective tasks being welcoming to tourists. Despite his extensive travels and connections, Ban says all his inspiration came from the Bible.



Pastor Ban (in the suit) with his village congregation. Image by Seb Rumsby.

Even formerly hostile government cadres acknowledge some potentially positive aspects of Hmong Christianity. For example, upon conversion Christians are strongly encouraged to quit drinking alcohol and smoking completely.

Since domestic violence is strongly associated with intoxication, Hmong women see Christianity as a path to empowerment and usually convert first, persuading their husbands to follow them. Although pastors are overwhelmingly men, women comprise the majority of congregations and lead in various activities of the church life.

On the other hand, alcohol consumption is traditionally an important form of male bonding, so refusing to do this has caused conflict between Hmong Christians and non-Christians. Families and communities have been torn apart as both sides harbor bitterness and misunderstanding towards each other, fueled by state denunciations of religious activity.



The qeej instrument (right) is an iconic cultural symbol, but is unpopular among Hmong Christians. Image by Seb Rumsby.

Another concern is that Hmong Christians often reject traditional religious rituals and ceremonies. Even traditional musical instruments like the *qeej* are treated with suspicion

by Christians for their association with traditional funeral ceremonies, and are no longer taught to the next generation.

Many Hmong shamans and non-Christians fear that their culture is being lost. Government officials also worry, because ethnic tourism in the highlands is being promoted by putting these cultures and customs on show. Hmong Christians object to this accusation. Through studying the Hmong Bible, they claim to be preserving their language and script, a crucial aspect of culture that is no longer taught in schools.

In closing, pastors like Ban claim Christianity to be an alternative route to development for the Hmong despite government opposition, but this is contested. These issues are likely to become more and more visible as Christianity continues to grow among the Hmong and the other ethnic groups of Vietnam.

Religious prisoner of conscience Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh released

USCIRF Urges the United States to Continue Raising Religious Freedom with Vietnam

USCIRF (31.07.2017). – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed relief that the Vietnamese government has released religious prisoner of conscience Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and allowed him, his wife Tran Thi Hong, and their five children to leave the country. Pastor Chinh was sentenced in 2012 to 11 years' imprisonment and endured solitary confinement and torture in prison. The family has arrived in the United States after the U.S. government granted Pastor Chinh humanitarian parole.

"The Vietnamese government finally has done the right thing by releasing Pastor Chinh from prison. We welcome his admission, along with his family, to the United States. The reality is that he should not have been imprisoned in the first place for simply practicing his faith," said USCIRF Commissioner Jackie Wolcott, who has advocated on behalf of the pastor. ***"Pastor Chinh was falsely charged and imprisoned and treated cruelly, as are countless other religious believers and human rights activists who continue to be harassed, detained, and tortured in Vietnam."***

Commissioner Wolcott took up the case of [Pastor Chinh and his wife](#) as part of USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). Through this project, Commissioners work for the release of individuals who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs, practices, advocacy, or identity and the laws and practices that led to their imprisonment.

USCIRF commends the brave efforts of Pastor Chinh's wife, Tran Thi Hong, who worked tirelessly on behalf of her husband. Vietnamese authorities frequently harassed and surveilled Mrs. Hong, including beating her for meeting with then U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein about her husband's case.

USCIRF has recommended since 2002 that the State Department designate Vietnam as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Through law, policy, and practice, the Vietnamese government perpetrates or tolerates serious religious freedom abuses, particularly against unregistered religious organizations and in rural areas of some provinces.

"Although USCIRF recommends Vietnam be designated a CPC, we also recognize that the government has demonstrated a willingness to engage on freedom of religion or belief," said USCIRF Chairman Dr. Daniel Mark, who has traveled to Vietnam on behalf of USCIRF. ***"The United States must continue to ensure that religious freedom is pursued both privately and publicly at every level of the bilateral relationship so that Vietnam takes positive and lasting steps toward freedom of religion or belief, including releasing religious prisoners of conscience."***

Govt seizes Benedictine land in Vietnam

Property theft follows desecration of cross and statue of Jesus

UCA NEWS (10.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2uHuYS1> - The Vietnamese government has stolen land owned by the Benedictine order in central Vietnam says the head of the country's bishops.

"Government authorities have stolen Benedictine land and sold it to local and foreign enterprises because they want to attract investment from enterprises," Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Chi Linh, head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam told Eglises D'Asie on Jul. 3, while he was in France.

The government has seized most of 107 hectares of farm land and pine forest but left six hectares for Thien An Monastery itself.

Archbishop Linh, 67, accused authorities of "mocking Benedictines' rights and religious organizations' rights as well."

The monks have had legal ownership of the monastery in central Thua Thien Hue Province since 1940.

The alleged theft of land was not an isolated incident.

On June 28-29, police were among a crowd of some 200 people — some armed with knives, iron rods and batons — who broke into the monastery. Witnesses says that the mob attacked the Benedictines and desecrated a cross and a statue of Jesus.

Six Benedictines were badly injured, including one who was beaten to unconsciousness. Police prevented him from being hospitalized.

Sources say the attacks were due to a long-time land dispute between the government and the monks over pine forests on the Benedictine's land.

Archbishop Linh, who became archbishop of Hue Archdiocese last October, said Catholics — who recall massacres perpetrated by northern communists in 1968 — don't dare speak up for the Benedictines.

The church official, who visited the monastery on June 16, said Benedictine monks asked the Archbishop's House to support their efforts to reclaim their properties.

Vietnamese pastor punished for 'reports' to US diplomats; Catholic blogger to be expelled to France



Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh (USCIRF)

WorldWatchMonitor (15.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rxYjAm> - A pastor imprisoned in south-east Vietnam is being further punished for telling a visiting U.S. diplomatic delegation about abuses he has suffered.

Nguyen Cong Chinh, serving an 11-year sentence for “undermining national solidarity” by religious activities with ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, met US consular officials in Ho Chi Minh City on 25 May. He told them about shards of glass being put into his food, and enduring corporal punishment and humiliation because, he said, he refused to do what prison officers require.

Immediately after the US delegation left the prison, Chinh was isolated from other prisoners and put into a cramped space, according to his wife, Tran Thi Hong, who saw him on 7 June.

Hong accused Vietnamese officials of using “shameful and divisive tactics” to put pressure on her husband when she discovered, during a visit on 11 May, that he had been told that she had been unfaithful.

Hong, a mother of four, was herself tortured, beaten and questioned at a police station for two months after she too met a U.S. delegation on religious freedom in March 2016 in Pleiku city, Central Highlands.

Vietnam has 83 prisoners of religious freedom behind bars, reported BPSOS, a U.S.-based NGO on June 6.

Meanwhile [Radio Free Asia](#) reports that Cambodia has repatriated 16 Montagnard asylum seekers to Vietnam after they failed to meet its requirements for refugee status. The Montagnards are some 30 tribes of indigenous people from Vietnam’s Central Highlands, where Nguyen Cong Chinh was based.

Many Montagnards practice forms of evangelical Protestantism, putting them at odds with Vietnam’s communist rulers who tightly control religion.

In 2001, Vietnamese troops crushed hill tribe protests in the Central Highlands, prompting an exodus of Montagnards. Hanoi routinely asks Cambodia to return those who flee.

The 16 were handed over to the Vietnamese authorities on 8 June. They were accompanied by officials from the UNHCR who arranged their return. The Montagnards were not deported but “voluntarily agreed to return while the UN was making arrangements for them”, according to Tan Sovichea, a Cambodian immigration spokesman.

He added that the UNHCR had been working with Vietnamese authorities to ensure that the Montagnards would be safely returned and protected from persecution for their attempt to flee the country. Montagnards sent back by Cambodia in the past have been questioned and beaten up.

When contacted by Radio Free Asia, the UNHCR in Cambodia was not available for comment, but it was expected that their officials would continue with the Montagnards and Vietnamese authorities to where the would-be asylum seekers would be settled.

Since 2001 at least 3,000 Vietnamese Montagnards have sought refugee status in Cambodia. Without refugee status, Montagnards in Cambodia rely on the good will and help of NGOs and churches.

Some Christians were among a group of more than 50 Montagnard asylum seekers who fled Cambodia to Thailand in early 2017 amid fears of forced repatriation. However, as Thailand and Cambodia are not signatories to the different international treaties that deal with the status of refugees, [Montagnards become classified as ‘undocumented economic migrants’ with no rights or status](#) regardless of their registration with the UNHCR.

Vietnam to expel Catholic blogger

Also, the Vietnamese government’s plan to deport an outspoken Catholic blogger has been condemned by Reporters Without Borders (RWB), the international organisation campaigning for press freedom.

Peter Pham Minh Hoang, who posted writings about education, environmental issues and threats to Vietnam’s sovereignty from China which led to a 17-month prison sentence and three years of house arrest in 2011, has dual Vietnamese and French citizenship. On June 1 was told he is due to be deported to France.

Hoang, a university lecturer who acquired his French citizenship during many years in France, has been the target of both psychological and judicial harassment since his return to Vietnam in 2000, stated RWB on June 7.

However he has offered to renounce his French citizenship, saying that he will retain only his Vietnamese citizenship.

“My expectation is to live and die in my homeland,” he said. His wife takes care of her elderly mother and disabled brother. “Our family must be separated” if he is expelled, he states.

A spokesperson for France-based RWB said Vietnam’s decision “is typical of the blatant way they harass all those who raise controversial issues”.

Vietnam’s first ever law on religions since it was re-unified under communist rule in 1975 will come into effect in January 2018.

Jailed Vietnamese pastor punished after US visit

Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh confined after describing harsh prison treatment to American officials

UCANews (13.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sso9Ww> - An evangelical pastor imprisoned in southeast Vietnam is being held in a cramped confined space as punishment for telling a visiting U.S. diplomatic delegation about abuses he has suffered.

Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh gave officials from the U.S. Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City details on May 25 on how officials have treated him at Xuan Loc Prison, Dong Nai Province, said his wife Tran Thi Hong.

"Chinh said on the previous day, prison officials informed him about the meeting and asked him not to tell the visitors anything that would make them look bad," said Hong who visited her husband June 7.

"Chinh could not obey their order," she said. "He told the delegation his experiences of torture, threats and mistreatment that he has endured over six years." The pastor has been kept in three prisons since being arrested in 2011.

He told the U.S. consulate staff that prison officials have put shards of glass into his food, subjected him to corporal punishment such as beatings and being put in stocks, have humiliated him and put him in solitary confinement, she said.

The pastor has been subjected to these types of abuses because he refuses to do what prison officials require, she said.

Immediately after the U.S. delegation left the prison, Chinh was confined in the cramped space and isolated from other inmates, said his wife.

"I am very concerned about his poor health in solitary confinement because he is suffering severe sinusitis and high blood pressure," she said.

Hong, mother of four, was herself tortured, beaten and questioned at a police station for two months after she met with a U.S. delegation on religious freedom in March 2016 in Pleiku city.

Chinh was sentenced to 11 years in 2011 for providing religious activities to ethnic groups in the Central Highlands.

Vietnam has 83 prisoners of religious freedom behind bars, reported BPSOS, a U.S.-based NGO on June 6.

[Watch Jackie Wolcott from the U.S. Commission of International Religious Freedom speak out on behalf of Chinh and Hong in the USCIRF09 video here.](#)

Open Letter from USCIRF Commissioner Jackie Wolcott to Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and Mrs. Tran Thi Hong

USCIRF (15.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qNV5Ir> - Commissioner Jackie Wolcott sent the following letter to Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and Mrs. Tran Thi Hong on May 15, 2017.

May 15, 2017

Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh
Xuan Loc Prison
Dong Nai Province, Vietnam

Mrs. Tran Thi Hong
Hoa Lu Ward, Pleiku City,
Gia Lai Province, Vietnam

Dear Pastor Chinh and Mrs. Hong:

I write to you as a Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and a person of faith who is deeply concerned about your well-being. I want to express my Commission's and my own support and solidarity with you as you continue your struggles in support of religious freedom. Your plight rightfully has drawn the attention of people worldwide.

This is a poignant time to highlight your struggle. Twelve years ago this month, the United States and Vietnam reached an agreement requiring the Vietnamese government to improve religious freedom conditions in your country. Sadly, and as you know all too well, this agreement largely has been followed by more restrictions, not more freedom.

Tragically, Pastor Chinh, your detention for more than five years of your 11-year prison sentence is clearly and completely unjust. I understand that the Vietnamese authorities are denying you vitally needed medical treatment as you serve prison time for the alleged crime of "undermining national solidarity." As a minister to the Christian community in the Central Highlands, the government should protect, not punish, your voice for peaceful criticism of restrictions on religious freedom.

Mrs. Hong, we understand that you too have been subjected to frequent government surveillance and harassment, including one year ago this month when Vietnamese police officers harshly interrogated you, burst into your home and assaulted your son. Please know that I will not forget your family's ill-treatment.

As a religious freedom advocate myself, I have been deeply inspired by both of you and your resiliency under these cruel conditions. As long as you remain in prison, Pastor, and as long as the Vietnamese authorities continue to unfairly treat you and your family, please be assured that I am dedicated to publicly and privately working on your behalf, so that your family can be reunited and you can freely practice your faith, openly and without further threat.

With deepest respect,

Ambassador Jackie Wolcott

Ambassador Jackie Wolcott is a Commissioner at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a U.S. government body that monitors the universal right to religious freedom.

Amnesty International group in US sends 70 letters to EP delegation to Vietnam calling for the release of Buddhist dissident Thích Quảng Độ

Quê Mẹ (02.28.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lyV1WO> - In preparation for a visit to Vietnam by the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights from 20-24 February 2017, members of Amnesty International in Boston launched a letter-writing campaign to urge the EP delegation to press for the release of prominent Buddhist dissident Thích Quảng Độ, Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), currently under house arrest in Saigon.

Alvin Jacobson, who coordinated the campaign, informed the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) that he sent a parcel of 70 individually signed letters to Pier Antonio Panzeri, Chairman of the EP Subcommittee on Human Rights and head of the delegation to Vietnam to his office at the European Parliament in Brussels before the delegation's departure to Hanoi.

Describing Thích Quảng Độ as "a man who reflects all that is best in human rights", the letter called for his "religious freedom from government control" and "unconditional and immediate release".

"Notwithstanding years of imprisonment, both actual and under "house arrest", oppression of religious and political beliefs and convictions, screening and surveillance of all outside contacts, and limited access to health services, he has nevertheless become an international symbol and inspiration for religious freedom and non-violence", the letter said.

As case coordinator at Amnesty International's Group 56 (Lexington, Massachusetts) for Thích Quảng Độ and his predecessor, the late UBCV Patriarch Thích Huyền Quang for the past 14 years, Alvin Jacobson said that his group had "written hundreds, if not thousands, of letters to Vietnamese government officials, former President Obama, the Department of State, our congressional delegation, and to US based corporations doing business in Vietnam".

He appealed to Mr. Panzeri and the EP Human Rights Subcommittee to take urgent action to solve this tragic case : "Regrettably, Thich Huyen Quang died while still under pagoda arrest and unless something extraordinary can be accomplished very soon, the same fate is likely to be that of Thich Quang Do - an 88 year-old man in failing health".

During their trip, the EP delegation did ask to visit Thích Quảng Độ, but were told that it was "too far to travel". At a Press Conference before leaving Hanoi, they called on Vietnam to "put an end to religious persecutions" and said it would be "extremely difficult" to ratify the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement without improvements in Vietnam's human rights record.

Please see below to read this article in French.

Une section américaine d'Amnesty International envoie 70 lettres à la délégation du Parlement Européen pour la libération du dissident bouddhiste Thích Quảng Độ

Quê Mỹ (28.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mFamFU> - En prévision de la visite au Vietnam de la Sous-Commission « droits de l'Homme » du Parlement Européen, les membres d'Amnesty International de Boston avaient lancé une campagne de lettres pour demander à la délégation européenne de faire pression pour la libération du célèbre dissident vietnamien Thích Quảng Độ, Patriarche de l'Église Bouddhique Unifiée du Vietnam (EBUV), qui est actuellement en résidence surveillée à Saigon.

Alvin Jacobson, qui a coordonné la campagne, a informé le Comité Vietnam pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (VCHR) qu'il avait envoyé un colis comprenant 70 lettres individuelles à Pier Antonio Panzeri, Président de la Sous-Commission « droits de l'Homme » du Parlement Européen et chef de la délégation en visite au Vietnam, à son bureau à Bruxelles, avant son départ pour Hanoi.

Décrivant Thích Quảng Độ comme « un homme qui reflète tout ce qui est de meilleur dans les droits de l'Homme », les lettres en appellent au respect « de sa liberté religieuse [exempt] du contrôle du gouvernement » et à sa « libération inconditionnelle et immédiate ».

« Malgré des années de détention, en prison ou en « résidence surveillée », d'oppression de ses croyances et opinions politiques et religieuses, de contrôle et de surveillance de tous ses contacts avec l'extérieur, et d'accès limité aux soins médicaux, il n'en est pas moins devenu un symbole international et une source d'inspiration [pour la lutte en faveur de] la liberté religieuse et la non-violence », dit la lettre.

En tant que coordonnateur du Groupe 56 d'Amnesty International (Lexington, Massachusetts), en charge de Thích Quảng Độ et de son prédécesseur, feu le Patriarche de l'EBUV Thích Huyền Quang, pendant les 14 dernières années, Alvin Jacobson a rapporté que son groupe avait « écrit des centaines, si ce ne sont des milliers, de lettres aux membres du gouvernement vietnamien, à l'ancien Président Obama, au Département d'État, à nos représentants au Congrès et aux entreprises américaines opérant au Vietnam ».

Il a souligné auprès de M. Panzeri le besoin urgent d'une action forte du Parlement Européen : « Malheureusement, Thich Huyen Quang est décédé alors qu'il était toujours détenu dans sa pagode et à moins que quelque chose d'extraordinaire ne soit accompli très vite, le même sort attend probablement Thich Quang Do — un homme âgé de 88 ans à la santé déclinante ».

Lors de son voyage, la délégation du PE a demandé à rencontrer Thích Quảng Độ, mais les autorités vietnamiennes ont répondu qu'il se trouvait « trop loin ». Lors de sa conférence de presse, la veille du départ de Hanoi, la délégation européenne a appelé le Vietnam à « mettre fin aux persécutions religieuses » et déclaré qu'il serait « extrêmement difficile » de ratifier l'Accord de libre-échange UE-Vietnam sans amélioration de la situation des droits de l'Homme au Vietnam.

Please see above to read this article in English.

USCIRF Assesses State Department's CPC Removal

USCIRF (08.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2me47eX> - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released *Religious Freedom in Vietnam: Assessing the Country of Particular Concern Designation 10 Years After its Removal*.

Because of its "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom, Vietnam had been designated a "country of particular concern" (or CPC) by the State Department from 2004 until 2006, when, as a result of U.S. diplomatic negotiations, Vietnam promised to improve religious freedom.

This new report examines the history and efficacy of Vietnam's CPC designation and the implication on religious freedom in Vietnam 10 years after the State Department removed Vietnam as a "country of particular concern."

"Ten years after the State Department's removal of Vietnam as a CPC, religious freedom conditions in the country are at a pivotal moment. While these conditions have improved in some instances, severe religious violations continue that are inconsistent with international standards," said USCIRF Chair Thomas J. Reese, S.J. *"Although the Vietnamese government sought to address these concerns in the recently passed law on religion and belief, this measure is imperfect and disadvantages many religious communities. If Vietnam does not implement religious freedom reforms that are consistent with international standards, USCIRF will continue to call for its designation as a country of particular concern."*

Religious freedom conditions in many parts of Vietnam continue to deteriorate in some areas, notwithstanding that many individuals and communities freely practice their faith. In some areas, local authorities harass and discriminate against religious organizations that the government does not recognize. In addition, religious groups across Vietnam fear that the government will evict them from or demolish their properties. USCIRF has recommended CPC designation for Vietnam every year since 2002.

To view the report in English, [please click here](#). To view the report in Vietnamese, please [click here](#). For more information on religious freedom conditions in Vietnam, please see USCIRF's Vietnam chapter in the 2016 Annual Report (in [English](#) and [Vietnamese](#)).

Religious freedom in Vietnam assessing the country of particular concern designation 10 years after its removal

USCIRF (February 2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kpukmN> - On November 13, 2006, the U.S. Department of State (State Department) lifted Vietnam's designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, after only 26 months. The lifting of the designation acknowledged the Vietnamese government's actions to improve religious freedom, and the speed and the method by which it was achieved—diplomatic activity—remain noteworthy a decade later.

The 10-year anniversary of the lifting of the CPC designation is marked by Hanoi's Law on Belief and Religion, adopted by the National Assembly on November 18, 2016. The measure contains some positive language, and as of this writing, the Vietnamese government was disseminating the law nationwide. The new law will: extend legal personality to some religious organizations; reduce the time that religious organizations must wait for government registration; encourage the establishment of religious schools

or other educational facilities; and transition some government approvals to notifications, for example, regarding clergy and certain religious activities. However, many religious organizations and international observers view the law as fundamentally flawed because it will increase the government's control over religious life and make activities it deems "illegal" subject to the force of law. The law also will limit freedom of religion or belief through vaguely worded and broadly interpreted national security provisions.

This contrast characterizes religious freedom in Vietnam today: modest improvements paired with repressive government control. To be sure, the freedom to practice one's faith or beliefs in Vietnam has come a long way since the dark days following the 1975 communist takeover. Many individuals and religious communities are able to exercise their religion or belief freely, openly, and without fear. To its credit, the Vietnamese government has made a concerted effort to improve conditions in a number of ways. For example, the government is creating more space for religious organizations to conduct charitable work and taking steps to improve relations with the Vatican. In many communities, religious organizations and local officials get along well, with little to no interference by the latter. And the government solicited limited public input on its religion law, a move that would have been unheard of just a few years ago.

Nevertheless, the Vietnamese government's complicity in or indifference to egregious violations of religious freedom in many parts of the country is deeply troubling. In some areas, local authorities harass and discriminate against religious organizations that do not have government recognition, and in others, they threaten religious followers with eviction from or demolition of their places of worship or other religious buildings—in some instances carrying out these threats. Law enforcement officials continue to detain, arrest, and/or imprison individuals due to their religious beliefs or religious freedom advocacy. The scope and scale of these violations make clear that Vietnam still is a long way from respecting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief as defined by international law and covenants.

Of all the countries the U.S. government has designated as CPCs, Vietnam is unique in that it is the only one removed from the CPC list due to diplomatic activity. This raises several questions: Why was Vietnam first designated as a CPC? What was different about this designation that led to Vietnam's swift removal from the list? If the strategy was a success in de-listing Vietnam, why has it not been replicated in other countries? This paper examines the history and efficacy of Vietnam's CPC designation, ultimately arguing it should be re-designated...

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