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VIETNAM: Religious freedom group hits out at sentences against Peng Lei members

Vietnam religious freedoms group hits out at sentences against Peng Lei members

Vietnam's Interfaith Council said sentence was a serious violation of the issue of freedom of religion and belief.

Radio Free Asia (28.07.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3Qa9fet> – The Vietnam Interfaith Council has lashed out at the harsh sentences given to six members of the Peng Lei Buddhist House.

They were sentenced last week to a combined 23 years and six months in prison on charges of “abusing democratic freedoms” under Article 331 of the Criminal Code.

Police suspended investigations into further allegations of incest and fraud but indicated that other charges may follow.

The council, dedicated to fighting for religious freedom, has members representing five major religions in Vietnam: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Cao Daism, and Hoa Hao Buddhism.

In a statement, the organization expressed “strong opposition to the unjust and illegal case, which is contrary to the basic principles of international justice.”

At the same time, the group denounced the Vietnamese government for “defying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, depriving the Vietnamese people of basic freedoms, including freedom of religion and speech, freedom of association and the right to a fair trial.”

Thich Khong Tanh, co-chair of the Interfaith Council, explained to RFA why the group released its statement.

“The Interfaith Council has been present in Vietnam for ten years, and its stance has always been to advocate for freedom of religion, belief, and human rights in Vietnam,”.

This [sentence] is a serious violation of the issue of freedom of religion and belief. It is also insulting the dignity of human beings, just as the human rights of the people in Vietnam are not respected.”

During the trial, one of the issues raised by the judge was that the Peng Lei sect refused to register to join the Vietnamese Buddhist Church.

Retreat head Le Tung Van said this was because he feels the Vietnamese Buddhist Church is “unworthy” to participate.

Thich Khong Tanh said the Peng Lei sect has the right to practice Buddhism the way they want, not necessarily by joining the Vietnamese Buddhist church:

“You naturally force people into your circle for you to manage, then how can that be called freedom of belief, freedom of thought, freedom of religion.”

“Vietnamese Buddhism is very diverse, and the practice takes many forms. Because of the Buddha’s teachings, there are forty-eight thousand cultivation methods. So depending on the people, if we can access something taught by the Buddha and if we want to practice, we can all get it.”

Since 2016 Thich Khong Tanh has held the role of Co-Deputy Director of the Executive Council of the Sangha of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, an organization separated from the church dating back to the Republic of Vietnam.

Another member of the Vietnam Interfaith Council, Cao Dai clerk Hua Phi, also told RFA that the statement the organization made to affirm the religious freedom of its members and to denounce the repressive policy of the Vietnamese state was justified:

“We fight for Vietnam to have freedom of religion. No one has the right to force us to follow a religion that we don’t like.”

“Secondly, we find that for these unjust judgments, the online community as well as the activists need to speak up to let the world know that in Vietnam, rulers often impose their own versions of the law and use punishment to deter those who do not obey the will of the authorities.”

He also said that the government initially falsely accused Le Tung Van of committing incest, but later used Article 331 to try to show the nature of this case is to abolish unregistered groups such as Peng Lei sect

On July 26, the leader of Long An Provincial Police said there was not enough evidence to charge Le Tung Van with incest and said he would stop accepting allegations of this crime.

The Interfaith Council also “requested the United Nations Human Rights Agency, international human rights organizations, and liberal and democratic countries around the world to pressure the communist government of Vietnam to respect human rights and comply with international judicial procedures and principles for the Vietnamese people.”

Seventh defendant surrenders to police

Le Thu Van, a seventh defendant in the case, turned herself in to police on Thursday, sources said.

Van, 65 and now suffering from end-stage colon cancer, asked Dang Dinh Manh—one of the defense lawyers for the Peng Lai group— to accompany her to the police station, Manh told RFA

“On the afternoon of July 27, I was informed that Le Thu Van was on the way to my home in Ho Chi Minh City and had asked me to accompany her to a police station,” Manh said.

“At 10:00 p.m. she arrived at my place and informed me of her intention, so I contacted my ward police and asked them to receive her. I also told them about her critical health condition and her need for a medical check-up.”

Police asked Manh to let Van stay at his home overnight and then took her into custody at 7:30 a.m. on Thursday morning.

“They had already contacted Long An police and received confirmation of the warrant for her arrest. The Long An police are now sending a car to pick her up,” Manh added.

Writing on his Facebook page on Thursday evening, Manh said that Van was later released and had returned to the Peng Lai temple in Long An.

The story was updated to include information on the July 28 surrender to police of Le Thu Van, a seventh defendant in the Peng Lai Temple case.

Photo: The trial of six members from the Peng Lei Buddhist House in Duc Hoa district, Long An on July 20. RFA

[Further reading about FORB in Vietnam on HRWF website](#)

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