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Authorities destroy Unified Church of Vietnam's Son Linh Pagoda

Followers say they are under pressure to join the State-approved Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

RFA (13.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3jbfmmt> - Local authorities in Kon Tum province in Vietnam's Central Highlands region have destroyed a pagoda belonging to the independent Unified Church of Vietnam.

Police and dozens of local officials from Plei Kan town and Ngoc Hoi district descended on the Son Linh Pagoda in the early hours of Tuesday morning. By 11 a.m. the pagoda had been completely demolished. The abbot, Thich Nhat Phuoc, was visiting another pagoda in Vung Tau province, some 600 kilometers (373 miles) south, at the time.

His mother, Ngoc Luong, who lives about 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) away, went to the pagoda when she heard it was being destroyed but was prevented from entering the area by the police.

"In the early morning, I received a call from Nhat Hoa [a monk at the pagoda], so I went down. I asked to enter but the authorities did not let me in and others kicked me out," she told RFA.

"I said I was Mr. Phuoc's mother and asked them to let me in to take out his belongings because he'd gone away a few days ago. They still wouldn't let me in."

A video provided by Luong shows police officers and people in plain clothes blocking her motorbike, preventing her from entering the area.

She said local government workers carried Buddha statues and worshiping tablets out of the pagoda and then tore down the wooden building with chainsaws, cranes and excavators. According to Luong, one told her Son Linh was not a pagoda but a temporary house and her son was not a monk. She said another snatched her camera and two more grabbed her hand, forcing her to the floor.

A monastery was established on the site in 2009 and a temple was built there in 2018. The following year the Ngoc Hoi district government demolished it, so the monks replaced it with a temporary structure made of wood and corrugated iron.

The abbot of Thien Quang pagoda in Vung Tau province bought the land and asked his disciple, Thich Nhat Phuoc, to come and look after it. Phuoc turned it into a place of worship, visited by many local Buddhists. However local authorities said the building had been built illegally on farm land and refused the abbot's petitions to rebuild the

temple. When monks renovated the temple last year so they could live there the Church was fined by local authorities.

On Oct, 27 this year, the People's Committee of Ngoc Hoi district ordered the abbot to dismantle the building within 45 days saying: "The illegal construction of houses on agricultural land ... causes difficulties for land management, affecting security and social order in the area."

This month Plei Kan town authorities ordered the abbot to comply with the request by Dec. 12, otherwise they would destroy it and charge him the cost of the demolition.

Phuoc told RFA many people had built houses on agricultural land nearby but had not been forced to destroy them. The abbot said the real reason authorities destroyed the pagoda was because he refused to join the Vietnam Buddhist Church, a religious organization that is a member of the State-linked Vietnam Fatherland Front.

"They find ways to suppress and destroy independent pagodas that do not follow the Vietnamese Buddhist Church," he said. "They do not recognize independent Buddhist institutions as temples."

RFA called the heads of the People's Committees of Plei Kan town and Ngoc Hoi district, but no one answered the phone. Emails requesting information on the pagoda's destruction went unanswered.

Authorities have destroyed many more places of worship belonging to the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and prevented others from operating. They include Lien Tri Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City; Phap Bien, Dat Quang and Thien Quang pagodas in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province; Van Linh pagoda in Lam Dong province; and Thong Linh pagoda in Dak Lak province.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Dec. 2 he was putting Vietnam on a "Special Watch List" because it "commits or tolerates serious violations of religious freedom."

Photo: The remains of Son Linh Pagoda, which was destroyed by local authorities in Kon Tum province on Dec. 13, 2022. Facebook: Tue Dang

Commemoration Day of FORB Victims of Violence: 29 NGOs protest

September 20, 2022

To: The Steering Committee of International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA)

- Her Excellency Fiona Bruce MP, Prime Minister's Special Envoy, United Kingdom, Steering Committee Chair
- His Excellency Robert Rehak, Ambassador and Special Envoy for Holocaust, Interfaith Dialogue and Freedom of Religion, Czech Republic, Steering Committee Vice-Chair
- The Honorable Rashad Hussain, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, United States, Steering Committee Member

- His Excellency Joao Lucas Quental Novaes de Almeida, Minister, Brazil, Steering Committee Member

Dear IRFBA Steering Committee:

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are writing to express our deep concern over the harassment and reprisals committed by Vietnamese authorities against individuals and communities for observing the August 22 International Day Commemorating Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, which was established by the UN General Assembly in May 2019. As a member state of the United Nations, the Vietnamese government should have encouraged citizens in marking this day as well as facilitated their participation. As a candidate for the UN Human Rights Council, it is setting an extremely poor example.

In early June 2022, three Montagnard Christians in Cu M'Gar District, Dak Lak Province, were fined 4 million VND each for having observed last year's August 22 International Day. On August 20 of this year, the provincial police forced a group of Cao Dai followers in Long Xuyen City, An Giang Province, to stop their observance ceremony and sign a pledge not to resume it on the following days. On August 22, the police "invited" the leader of another group of Cao Dai followers in Long Xuyen City to the police station and kept him there for 5 hours so that he could not conduct commemorative activities.

Similarly, five Montagnard house church leaders in Dak Lak Province were "invited" to the police station on August 22, probably as a ploy to interfere with their observance of this international day. The police of Phu Yen Province was even more oppressive; they "invited" Nay Y Blang, leader of a Montagnard Christian house church in Ea Lam Commune, to "working sessions" at the police station every day after he had officiated an early observance on August 17. Each working session lasted from dawn to late evening. The police threatened that he would end up in prison within this year.

Several of the victims already wrote to government authorities, including Vietnam's President, to seek their explanation of the legal basis for the threats, interference, and penalties directed at them by the police. Many of these religious believers and their communities have been victims of acts of violence in the past because of their faith. Therefore, observing the August 22 International Day bears special meaning for them. Many of these victims, despite the punishments inflicted on them and the continued threats of even more severe punishment, are determined to exercise their right and support the next United Nations-initiated international day: they plan to observe International Human Rights Day on December 10.

We note that on 22 August, the embassies in Vietnam of seven countries (Austria, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, the UK, and the USA) issued a joint statement in support of this international day:

"On this important day, we would like to express our support for the victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief, as well as to their families and loved ones. Today, we honor those who have suffered for exercising their human rights as well as those who defend these rights.

"We urge states and people everywhere to join forces in the fight against violence and discrimination, and in ensuring all individuals can enjoy their human rights in dignity and freedom."

Reflecting the spirit of this joint statement, we call on IRFBA government members to: Collectively express concern at the upcoming UN Human Rights Council session in light of Vietnam's announced candidacy for a seat on this council;

Instruct their missions in Vietnam to make a joint request to the Vietnamese government for a thorough investigation the above incidents; and

Call on human rights officers at their missions in Vietnam to visit communities targeted by the government and/or invite representatives of these communities to meetings in Ha Noi or in Saigon (HCM City).

We thank you for your consideration.
Respectfully,

Organizations:

1. Advocate for Faith and Justice in Vietnam, USA
2. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), Thailand
3. Association for the Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Vietnam, USA
4. Boat People SOS – Religious Freedom Project, USA
5. Buddhist Solidarity Association, USA
6. Campaign to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia (CAMSA) (Thailand), Thailand
7. Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam, USA
8. Christ’s Mandate for Missions, USA
9. Christian Freedom International, USA
10. Church of Scientology National Affairs Office, USA

11. Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam, USA
12. Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience., France
13. CSW, United Kingdom
14. Decency & Clarity, USA
15. Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands, Vietnam
16. International Christian Concern, USA
17. International Organization to Preserve Human Rights, USA
18. Jubilee Campaign, United Kingdom
19. Law and Liberty Trust, USA
20. Montagnards Stand for Justice (MSFJ), Thailand
21. Prayer Pioneers, United Kingdom
22. Red Eagle Enterprises, USA
23. Save the Persecuted Christians, USA
24. Southeast Asian Grassroots Alliance (SAGA) - Mekong Working Group on Freedom of Religion and Belief (MEFORB), USA
25. Stichting Vietnam Human Rights Foundation, The Netherlands
26. Vietnam Coalition Against Torture, USA
27. Vietnamese American Community of the USA, USA
28. Vietnamese Women for Human Rights, USA
29. Vietnamese Women for Human Rights, Vietnam

Photo: Cao Dai Temple

Hmong Christians in Vietnam suffering severe persecution

Federal authorities do nothing as local officials violate religion law.

Morning Star News (25.07.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3PTFtel> - Severe persecution of Hmong Christians is underway in Nghe An Province in Vietnam.

In the central Vietnam province, officials vying with each other to create "Christian-free zones" operate "with no conscience or humanity," as if they were in a different country than the one whose religious freedom measures they are violating, Christian leaders say.

Authorities put immense pressure on animist relatives to drive Christians from their homes, exiling them from family, livelihood and community with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Some Christians have been forcibly separated from spouse and children, home and fields, sometimes even their wedding rings, if they persist in their faith. Then officials wash their hands and say these outrages are purely family matters.

The only way out is for the offending Christians to recant and revert to the animistic practices of their ancestral religion. Most steadfastly refuse to give up their new-found faith, which they testify has freed them from demonic oppression.

More often than individuals, it is entire extended Christian families who are driven from their homes, but earlier this month one mother was separated from caring for her two sons. Though only 33, Lau Y Pa has two teenage sons whom she was unable to contact. When Morning Star News met with her on July 10, wet tissues were piled in front of her as she had just learned that another newly Christian relative, Lay Y Tong, had suffered the same fate.

Such suffering, which has been quietly going on for years (especially in Nghe An Province), has hit mainly members of the not-yet-legally recognized Vietnam Good News Mission Church (VNGNMC) and the officially recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN-N).

The VNGNMC connects its victims with congregations and Christians able to shelter them in the provincial capital of Vinh, or in Saigon or Hanoi.

Both church organizations report the worst violations of religious liberty are taking place in the Ky Son District communes of Huoi Tu and Na Ngoi. Two extended families of 13 and 19 people in the Na Ngoi commune villages of Khu Kha I and Ka Duoi respectively have been regularly pressured and persecuted since April, when they were officially accepted as members of the government-recognized ECVN-N.

Gangs of top local officials and police officers, numbering up to 20, come repeatedly, sometimes in the middle of the night, browbeating and bullying them and threatening worse unless they return to spirit worship. Refusal to recant for these families has meant the seizing of their livestock, crops, fields and farm machinery and tools, the ransacking of their homes and cutting off their electricity. It has resulted even in refusal to let their neighbors charge their cell phones.

In the worse cases, villagers are pressured into seizing all the Christians' property and driving them out of their community. This has happened regularly to ethnic minority families in various parts of northern Vietnam in recent years; such treatment leaves less photographic evidence than beatings but has graver consequences.

ECVN-N leaders have appealed to local officials and federal agencies for redress by phone and in writing, pointing out that government officials are breaking specific articles of the national Law on Belief and Religion. Church leaders' attempts to visit the persecuted have been blocked, and they have received no response from any government agency.

The VNGNMC has written and/or phoned the commune, four district level agencies, four provincial level ones, and five federal ones. These appeals cite provisions of Vietnam's religion law that authorities have broken. Church leaders have received no reply, leading them to believe they have no redress.

The VNGNMC also has just reported the case of Vu Ba Sua; because of her faith, officials have refused to register the birth of her baby, now over 2 months old. This makes the child ineligible for social benefits.

Sua took the child to the Ky Son hospital for a lung infection but was refused help. The hospital informed her that no Christians in Ky Son District were eligible for any government assistance. Further, because Sua and her husband made it clear they would not give up their faith, officials came to their home and confiscated livestock the government had earlier provided them.

Nghe An Province is the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh and thus proudly considered the cradle of the communist revolution. Officials compete for the honor of calling their jurisdiction "a Christian-free zone."

Church leaders have found that they are sometimes better off working out problems quietly with local officials rather than reporting abuses for international exposure and advocacy. At this point, without any response to months of patient and polite requests for redress, the church leaders are left with no choice but to ask for international assistance and pressure. The serious religious liberty abuses in Nghe An Province, completely contrary to Vietnam's own laws, beg for an international spotlight.

It is easy to blame solely recalcitrant local "outlier" officials, but the refusal of any Vietnamese authority to intervene is inexcusable and argues for embarrassing exposure and international accountability.

The urgent request of church leaders was, "Please intervene for our persecuted Christians now!"

Photo: Evangelical Church in Vietnam. (Steffen Schmitz (Carschten), Wikimedia Commons)

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 Daim, 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 Lai 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

Vietnam floats draconian new religion decrees

Proposed high fines, shutdowns and onerous regulations submitted for feedback.

Morning Star News (14.06.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3ncEmJU> - When the "Government of Vietnam" posted two draft religion decrees the first week of June, even ranking staff members of the Government Bureau of Religious Affairs were taken by surprise and encouraged religious leaders to strongly object.

The decrees with ancillary documents were posted online for input by government departments and the public. The document dump was 151 pages.

One draft decree would take the place of Decree 162/2017, which provided implementation guidelines for the penultimate Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) that went into effect Jan. 1, 2018. After three years, the government authors of the draft decrees admit to shortcomings in the original implementation decree and offer this attempt to fix them. In practice the revisions would only tighten control.

Most concerning is a draft decree stipulating remedies and punishments for administrative infractions of the existing LBR and other rules. It is already nicknamed the "Punishment Degree." The original such draft decree floated three years ago received such a negative response that it was never passed or enforced. The current draft is hardly better.

One Vietnamese analyst put it this way: "If you start with something which is very bad at its core, any additions to it can only be bad too."

He referred to Vietnam's record on human rights, especially religious freedom, internationally known to be very deficient.

"Tinkering with the margins will not change the rotten core," the analyst concluded.

In the draft punishment decree, each of the religion regulations and rules comes with an administrative punishment schedule ranging from "warning" to "severe warning," then to graduated fines up to 30 million VND (US\$1,300) for an individual and 60 million VND (US\$2,600) for an organization. Beyond that, punishments range up to shutting down a religious organization entirely.

Further, those accused of breaking religion rules are warned that they may also be violating criminal codes, putting them in double jeopardy. Article 8 of the punishment

decree, for example, says, that if someone disagrees with or disobeys their religious leader, they may also be charged with breaking civil laws such as violating social peace and order, or fire safety codes, etc.

There are extremely onerous reporting requirements. All local church activities must be reported and approved a year in advance. Every office address change and reassignment of church staff must be reported within short time limits, or churches would face fines.

Mandatory study of Vietnam's "revolutionary history" and Vietnamese law must be included in all training curriculum for clergy. Punishments include everything up to shutting down the training institutions.

Foreigners are limited in their activities with Vietnamese co-religionists. The amount a foreigner puts into an offering plate at a worship service must be reported, as must all financial contributions from abroad.

Current regulations, unchanged in the new draft decree on LBR implementation, call for religious organizations to submit detailed bios for all leadership candidates for government preapproval. Only then will the government grant permission to meet in general assembly to vote.

In a current case, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South (ECVN-S) submitted the names and bios of 257 eligible candidates for about 30 leadership positions to be democratically decided. The government declined to accept one pastor whom they identified as a "troublemaker."

The ECVN-S responded by asking the government "not to interfere in the internal affairs of their legally recognized organization" and advised authorities that if the said pastor were guilty of civil crimes they should go after him by legal means. This conflict now puts the ECVN-S's long-planned July 2022 quadrennial General Assembly in jeopardy.

Three entire chapters of the punishment decree have to do with the registration and legal recognition of religious organizations. In one of many head-scratchers, a religious organization that is not yet legally recognized may be fined if it "uses its religious reputation to further its cause."

Very concerning is Article 28 of the proposed replacement decree for Decree 162/2017. It extends all religion regulation to apply also to online meetings and activities, an entirely new phenomenon of the COVID-19 era. Hard to imagine the interference that could cause.

Much ink is spilled about things that are "forbidden." Most significant is the continued reference to nebulous "crimes" such as "taking advantage of belief and religion" or "causing social division" or "violating public morality" or "disturbing social order." There are no definitions as to what these forbidden things actually mean, leaving them completely open to subjective interpretation.

Under such "forbiddens," it is hard to tell if not worshipping one's ancestors or venerating national heroes could lead to being classified as violating national morality or being labelled a cult. The "forbiddens" open the way to endless pretexts for accusing people.

One Vietnamese leader said of the new draft punishment decree, "It appears to be written with the purpose of encouraging the punishment of individuals and organizations. It's not even the money fines as much as how this whole wretched system looks under the advertisement of providing more 'freedom of religion.'"

While a few egregious examples are highlighted here, the root problem is that Vietnam puts on full display its embarrassing dogma of having to control all aspects of religion because it is still interpreted as a threatening and dangerous social phenomenon. Clearly, the top level of Vietnam's extensive security apparatus, which always manages to place its own personnel in key positions in the religion bureaucracy, is behind the proposed measures.

Religion authorities in Hanoi invited leaders of non-recognized house churches in northern Vietnam to a June 12-14 seminar to propagandize the new regulations. The government invitation expressed the expectation that "the guidance and propaganda provided by the seminar will win the hearts of house church leaders to complete all the necessary legal documents."

For most house churches, the regulations on religion themselves have made it impossible to apply for legal recognition. Officials have denied or ignored some that have tried to apply. But most house church groups have been reluctant to seek legal recognition because they have observed how the onerous regulations have handicapped legally recognized groups.

Said one knowledgeable Vietnamese observer, "If these decrees are passed in their present form, both legally recognized and unrecognized religious organizations will be like a small candle facing a typhoon."

Photo : Congress of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South in 2018 in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. (ECVN-S photo)