



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

Vietnam: Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 15 March 2010

Information on Religious freedom; Treatment of Catholics

Human Rights Watch in its annual report on human rights in Vietnam states:

“Vietnamese law requires that religious groups register with the government and operate under government-controlled management boards. Adherents of some unregistered religious groups, as well as religious activists campaigning for internationally-guaranteed rights, are harassed, arrested, or placed under house arrest.

In the Central Highlands, authorities in 2009 arrested dozens of Montagnard Christians accused of belonging to unregistered house churches considered subversive by the government, planning land rights protests, or conveying information about rights abuses to activists abroad. A focus of the crackdown was Gia Lai province, where more than 50 Montagnards were arrested and at least nine sentenced to prison during the year. On several occasions police beat and shocked Montagnards with electric batons when they refused to sign pledges to join the government sanctioned church.

Authorities continued to persecute members of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, whose supreme patriarch remained under pagoda arrest for his public criticism of government policies. Other religious activists imprisoned in Vietnam include Roman Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly, a Mennonite pastor, and several Hoa Hao Buddhists.

In July as many as 200,000 Catholics peacefully protested in Quang Binh after police destroyed a temporary church structure erected near the ruins of an historic church. Police used teargas and electric batons to beat parishioners, arresting 19, of whom seven were charged with disturbing public order.”

In September authorities forcefully expelled more than 300 Buddhist monks and nuns from a meditation center in Lam Dong established in 2005 with government approval. At least two monks were placed under house arrest after authorities forced them to return to their home provinces. Authorities took steps to close the center after its founder, peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, proposed in 2007 that the government ease religious freedom restrictions” (*Human Rights Watch (20 January 2010) Vietnam: "World Report 2010"*)

The *United States Department of States* annual report on religious freedom in Vietnam states:

“There are an estimated 8 million Catholics, although government statistics place the number at 6.15 million. Catholics live throughout the country, with the largest concentrations in the southern provinces around Ho Chi Minh City,

in parts of the Central Highlands, and in the provinces southeast of Hanoi. Catholicism has revived in many areas in recent years, with newly rebuilt or renovated churches and growing numbers of people who want to be religious workers." (US Department of State (26 October 2009) *Vietnam: "International Religious Freedom Report 2009*)

The report goes on to say

"Catholics in Son La City faced regular harassment by local officials and police and were prohibited from holding Christmas Mass. Local officials also barred a visiting priest from holding Easter services, and only allowed him to pray with congregants [...]

[...] Catholic priest Pham Van Loi continued to live under conditions resembling house arrest reportedly for reasons related primarily to his political beliefs or attempts to form political organizations, despite the apparent lack of any official charges against him. The CRA asserted that Father Loi was not under house arrest and that the Government did not restrict his religious activities. The movement of a number of other UBCV, Cao Dai, Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Protestant dignitaries and believers was occasionally restricted or monitored by police." (Ibid)

A report from *Amnesty International* states:

"The government maintains rigid control over all aspects of religious life in Viet Nam. Members of churches not officially approved by the state face repression, including being forced to renounce their faith, administrative detention and imprisonment. The Vietnamese authorities have a long history of persecuting religious groups they believe oppose the state. Members of such groups are regularly arrested, harassed and kept under surveillance. These include members of the evangelical Protestant community, Roman Catholics, Hoa Hao Buddhists and the Cao Dai church. The senior leadership of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam has been under house arrest or restrictions for decades, including the Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, Supreme Patriarch, who had been under house arrest since 1982 until his death in July 2008, and newly appointed Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do. Human rights violations against evangelical Christian Montagnards in the Central Highlands have continued for years, and people from the mostly Buddhist Khmer Krom community in southern An Giang province likewise face persecution." (Amnesty International (23 December 2009) *Vietnam: "Urgent Action 348/09 [ASA 41/013/2009]"*)

Freedom House in its annual report on Viet Nam states:

"Religious freedom is still restricted, but the situation has improved in recent years due to international pressure and greater integration with the global economy. All religious groups and most individual clergy members must join a party-controlled supervisory body. One such body exists for each religion that the state officially recognizes: Buddhism; Roman Catholicism; Protestantism; Islam; Cao Daiism, a synthesis of several religions; and the Hoa Hao faith, a reformist Buddhist church. Religious groups must obtain permission for most activities, including personnel decisions and building renovations. A small

number of religious leaders and adherents remain in prison or face other forms of government harassment. In recent years, the Catholic Church has been allowed to select its own new bishops and priests, although they must still be approved by the government, and clergy members have enjoyed greater freedom to travel both domestically and internationally." (Freedom House (16 July 2009) *Freedom in the World 2009 – Vietnam*)

References

Amnesty International (23 December 2009) *Vietnam: "Urgent Action 348/09 [ASA 41/013/2009]"*
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA41/013/2009/en/d6dea660-439a-4c8d-9b05-026e4c4caf49/asa410132009en.pdf>
(Accessed 15 March 2010)

Freedom House (16 July 2009,) *Freedom in the World 2009 – Vietnam*
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a64527128.html>

Human Rights Watch (20 January 2010) *Vietnam: "World Report 2010"*
<http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87404>
(Accessed 15 March 2010)

US Department of State (26 October 2009) *Vietnam: "International Religious Freedom Report 2009"*
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127294.htm>
(Accessed 15 March 2010)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources Consulted:

Agence France Presse
Amnesty International
European Country of Origin Information Network
Human Rights Watch
Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Lexis Nexis
Minorities at Risk
Online newspapers
Refugee Documentation Centre Library
Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database
UNHCR
UNHCR Refworld
US Committee for Refugees
US Department of State
US Library of Congress

