

*Unified
Buddhist Church
of Vietnam*

**The Movement for
Religious Freedom in Vietnam**



International Buddhist Information Bureau



Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

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VIETNAM COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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The **International Buddhist Information Bureau** is the Overseas Information Service of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). It was created in Paris in 1993 at the request of the UBCV in Vietnam to circulate information at home and abroad on the UBCV movement for religious freedom and human rights. **Vo Van Ai** is Director of the International Buddhist Information Bureau and also the UBCV's international spokesman.

The **Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR)** is a non-profit organization founded in Paris in October 1975. Its aims are to increase international awareness of the human rights situation, mobilize support for victims of human rights abuses and promote efforts for democracy in Vietnam. As an affiliate of the Paris-based **International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH)** founded in 1922, the VCHR has consultative status at the UNO, UNESCO, ILO and the Council of Europe.

Introduction

The amended Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, promulgated in December 2013, states that *"all citizens shall enjoy freedom of belief and religion"*, but that *"no-one can misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law"*. This caveat, which may seem legitimate at first reading, is in reality a serious impediment to religious freedom. For although Vietnam acceded to the UN International Covenant in Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1982, and adopted legislation in 2005 on the harmonization of laws, it continues to implement domestic legislation that criminalizes peaceful religious activities and is totally inconsistent with Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Under Vietnam's Criminal Code, acts of peaceful religious dissent may be considered as *"crimes against national security"* which make no distinction between acts of violence - such as terrorism - and peaceful acts of expression or association. Religious followers are routinely imprisoned under vaguely defined offences such as *"sowing division between religious believers and non-believers"*... *"undermining national solidarity"* (Article 87), *"circulating anti-socialist propaganda"* (Article 88), *"abusing democratic rights to encroach upon the interests of the State"* (Article 258), some of which carry up to twenty years in prison.

Under the 2004 *"Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions"*, which came into force in 2005, religions are subjected to a strict system of recognition and control. Only "recognized" religions or State-sponsored religious groups belonging to the Vietnam Fatherland Front are allowed to practice religious activities. The Ordinance is incompatible with international human rights standards because it places State controls on the exercise of religious freedoms which are incompatible with Article 18 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Vietnam acceded in 1982. Under the Ordinance, religious education is subordinated to the *"patriotic"* dictates of the Communist Party; worship may only be carried out in approved religious establishments; it is forbidden to *"abuse"* religious freedom to contravene prevailing Communist Party policies (article 8§2). Religious activities deemed to *"violate national security... negatively affect the unity of the people or the nation's fine cultural traditions"* are banned (article 15)¹. An implementation decree (Decree 92) on the Ordinance came into force in January 2013. Decree 92 does not expand protection of religious freedom, but on the contrary maintains strict state controls over all aspects of religious activities, and imposes harsher conditions on the process of registration.²

The National Assembly is currently debating a new "Law on Religion and Belief" which, if adapted as such, would place even greater restrictions on religious freedom and increase the scope of government control. The text has been strongly criticized by all religious communities in Vietnam. UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, offered to help Vietnam draft the law to ensure it conformed with international standards and norms, but Vietnam made no move to accept his proposal.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam

Buddhism is Vietnam's majority religion, yet the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), the oldest Buddhist organization is not recognized by the authorities and continues to be a key target of repression. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

¹ Officially recognized groups include the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Cham Islam, Catholicism, the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam, the Northern Evangelical Church of Vietnam, Southern Baptists, Adventists, one branch of the Mennonites, several branches of the Cao Dai faith, Hoa Hao, Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, the Bani Muslim sect, Threefold Enlightened Truth Path, Threefold Southern Tradition, the Baha'i community, the Mysterious Fragrance from Precious Mountains, the Four Gratuities, the Vietnam Christian Fellowship, and the Assembly of God. (See USCIRF 2013 Annual Report, <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Vietnam%202013.pdf>).

² See International Buddhist Information Bureau, 29 November 2012: "New Decree increases controls on religions" http://www.queme.net/eng/news_detail.php?numb=1955

describes the UBCV in its 2013 report as “*Vietnam’s largest religious organization with a history of peaceful social activism and moral reform efforts*” which has “*faced decades of harassment and repression for seeking independence from the officially-approved Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) and for appealing to the government to respect religious freedom and related human rights*”.³

Despite strong international pressure to recognize the legal status of the UBCV, the Vietnamese government continues to denounce it as an “*illegal*” or “*reactionary organization*”, which simply “*does not exist*”. Leaders of over 20 UBCV representative boards continue to suffer harassments, threats, Police interrogations and surveillance simply for seeking to attend the spiritual and humanitarian needs of poor people in 15 cities and provinces in central and southern Vietnam. Security Police systematically surround key UBCV Pagodas during Buddhist festivals such as the Vesak or Vu Lan, assaulting Buddhist monks and preventing followers from attending prayers and celebrations. Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do, 85, a 2014 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, remains under effective house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery without any justification or charge, after three decades in internal exile, prison and house arrest for his peaceful advocacy of religious freedom and human rights.

This policy of persecution against the UBCV has serious, long-term implications in Vietnam. With its philosophy of tolerance, compassion and the respect of life, the UBCV represents not only an essential element of the Vietnamese spiritual heritage, but it is also the nation’s largest civil society movement. With its vast network of human resources, the UBCV could play a vital role in Vietnam’s social, spiritual and cultural development, and in the peaceful process towards democratization and human rights in Vietnam.

Background

Buddhism came to Vietnam over twenty centuries ago, and since then has deeply impregnated the culture of Vietnamese people in all aspects of daily life. From the very outset, Vietnamese Buddhism developed a tradition of social engagement unique in South-East Asia, and Vietnamese Buddhists have always played an active role in all aspects of the nation’s social and political life.

After nine centuries of Chinese domination, the first independent Vietnamese State was founded in the 10th Century AD, largely thanks to the contribution of Zen Buddhist Masters and the ruling Buddhist monarchs of the Ly and Tran dynasties. This was the golden age of the Vietnamese nation, in

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“Vietnamese Buddhism, with its 2000-year tradition of compassion and tolerance, is followed by the great majority of the population. By banning the traditional Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and imprisoning its leaders, you stifle the spirit of vast numbers of Vietnamese, and jeopardize the reconstruction of a prosperous society in Vietnam.”

H.H. The Dalai Lama (Nobel Peace Prize 1989, Tibet)
Mairead Corrigan Maguire (Nobel Peace Prize, 1997, Ireland)
François Jacob (Nobel Medicine Prize, 1965, France)
José Ramos Horta (Nobel Peace Prize, 1996, East Timor)



³ Idem, note 1.

which science, literature and the arts flourished as never before.

From the French colonial period up to the early 1960's, under the Government of Ngo Dinh Diem, Buddhism was not entitled to function as a Church in its own right, but was limited to the status of a mere association under Colonial decree No. 10. The anti-Buddhist policies of President Diem led to mounting tension between Buddhists and the authorities. In June 1963, Thich Quang Duc set fire to himself to draw world attention to Buddhist cause. A wave of protest swept through the whole population, carrying off in its wake the Diem government, which fell on November 1st 1963.

The very first nation-wide Buddhist Congress was held in 1964 and following the abolition of Colonial Decree No. 10, the “Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam” (UBCV) regained its full, legitimate status. The UBCV thus represents the 2000-year tradition of Vietnamese Buddhism, and it has the unique characteristic of uniting Buddhism's two principle schools, the Northern School (Mahayana) and the Southern School (Theravada) into one congregation. It is adhered to by the majority of the Vietnamese population.

Overview of Government Repression against the UBCV

When the communist authorities took power in the South in 1975, they immediately launched a campaign to suppress the UBCV. The UBCV's vast network of schools, universities, pagodas, hospitals and humanitarian institutions were confiscated and turned into warehouses for Party organizations. Religious books were burned. The UBCV Headquarters in An Quang Pagoda were taken over by Security Police, and hundreds of nuns, monks and lay-Buddhist were arrested. Repression reached such a height that 12 UBCV monks and nuns in the province of Can Tho immolated themselves in November 1975 to protest against religious persecution.

The authorities then decided that if they could not suppress Buddhism by force, they should subject it to tight political controls. On 4 November 1981, they set up the State-sponsored “Vietnam Buddhist Sangha” (VBS) under control of the Communist Party's Vietnam Fatherland Front. The VBS became the only Buddhist organization to be officially recognized by the State. A widespread campaign was launched to urge, persuade or coerce UBCV Buddhist to join. The UBCV leadership refused, and a new spate of arrests followed. Prominent UBCV leaders such as Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do were sent into internal exile and placed under house arrest without charge.

The government then set up a vast network of controls, beginning with the three-fold mechanism of the “*ly lich*”, or curriculum vitae – on which monks and nuns must declare the political affiliations of even their families and friends), the “*Ho khai*”, or obligatory residence permit without which one is an illegal citizen, and the “*Cong an khu vuc*”, local Security Police who control every movement of the people in their ward, and have full powers to arrest anyone at will.

A “Government Religious Board” oversees all religious affairs, with headquarters in Hanoi and sections in all the provinces, towns and villages. The current head of the Government Religious Board is Lt.-Gen. Pham Dung, a high-ranking official of the Ministry of Public Security. A special “religious police force” (*công an tôn giáo* - A41) has also been set up, manned by political cadres who have no knowledge about religions. Several thousand police disguised as monks have infiltrated Buddhist pagodas, where they keep permanent surveillance on the activities of monks and followers.

Current Restrictions on the UBCV

Banned effectively (though not formally) since 1981, the UBCV pursues its legitimate religious activities *de facto*, in defiance of government repression. Since 2005, the UBCV's



Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do, who became the new UBCV leader after the passing of the late Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in July 2008, has set up a network of UBCV Representative Boards to fulfill the educational, spiritual and humanitarian needs of people in the poor provinces. To date, some 20 Representative Boards have been created, in the provinces of An Giang, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Bac Lieu, Binh Dinh, Binh Thuan, Binh Thanh District (Saigon), Dong Nai, Dong Thap, Hai Phong, Khanh Hoa, Lam Dong, Phu Yen, 3rd, 4th and 11th Districts (Saigon), Quang Nam-Danang, Quang Tri, Thua Thien-Hue, Tien Giang and Tuy Hoa. Although the State does not recognize the UBCV, Patriarch Thich Quang Do has formally notified the local People's Committees by letter of the creation and membership of each new Board.

Since their creation, however, and despite their purely religious and social activities, virtually all the UBCV Representative Boards have suffered Police interrogations, intimidation, public “denunciation sessions” and even expulsion of monks and nuns from their Pagodas. In many cases, Police have hired local thugs to vandalize UBCV property and assault UBCV monks and nuns. Buddhist followers have also suffered threats and harassments. Local authorities and Security Police punish Buddhists who frequent UBCV Pagodas by refusing to deliver permits and vital administrative papers, expelling their children from school or making them lose their jobs.

The Giac Minh Pagoda in Danang and its Superior monk Thich Thanh Quang, 75, are the targets of continuous repression by the local authorities. Thich Thanh Quang is the head of the UBCV's provincial board for Quang Nam-Danang and UBCV Commissioner for Youth.

For the past three years, the local People's Committee has prohibited the celebration of Buddhist festivals such as Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) Vesak (Buddha's Birth) and Vu Lan (All Souls' Day) at the Pagoda, and intercepted all Buddhists who try to attend. Buddhists who wish to bring offerings to the monks have come at dawn and laid offerings outside the Pagoda's gate to avoid Police reprisals. Plain-clothed local militia have repeatedly assaulted Thich Thanh Quang, who is currently in very poor health. He suffers from malnutrition and other illnesses since the police prohibited Buddhists coming to his Pagoda and bringing offerings and medicine. In 2013, over 200 Security Police surrounded Giac Minh Pagoda to prevent him celebrating the Vesak.

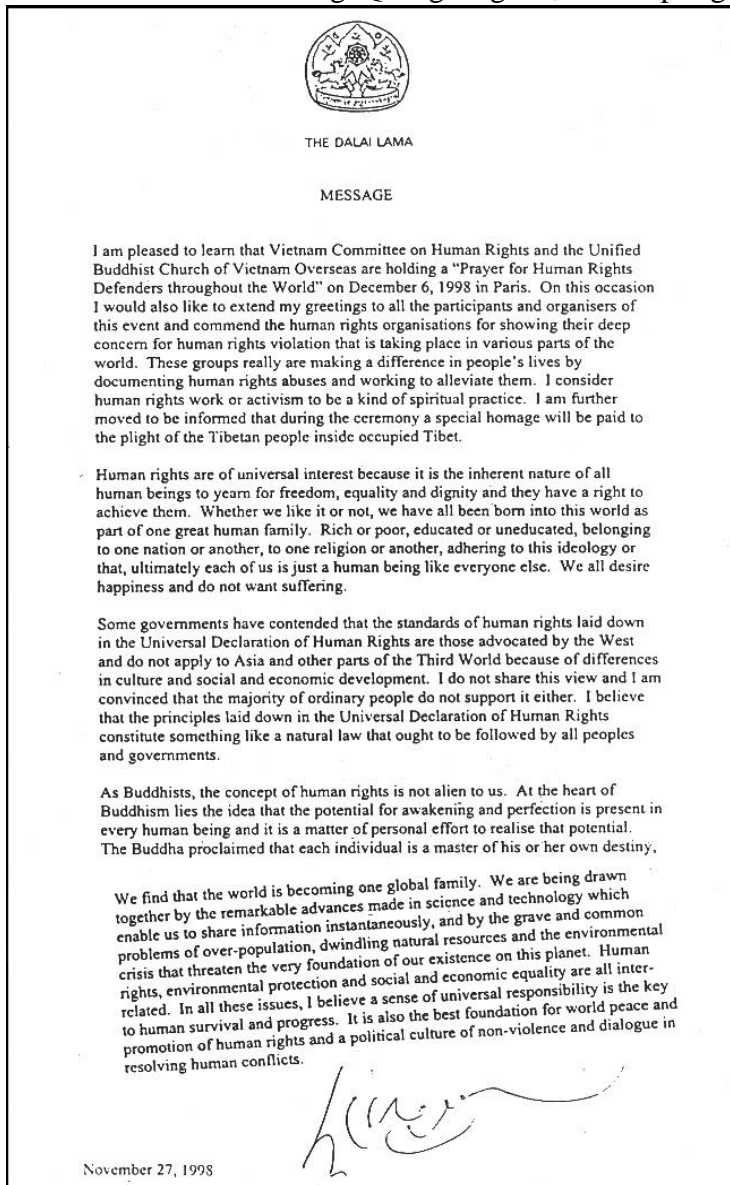
The Buddhist Youth Movement

Vietnam has also intensified repression against members of the Buddhist Youth Movement, an educational organization affiliated to the UBCV. Although the Buddhist Youth Movement is not officially recognized, the Communist authorities tolerate its educational activities. The BYM has an active membership of over 300,000 young Buddhists in Vietnam today. Buddhist youth

leader Le Cong Cau was subjected to interrogations in March 2013 and threatened with prosecution for posting articles on the Internet calling for the legalization of the banned UBCV. In January 2014, Le Cong Cau was again arrested and placed under house arrest without trial. In an audio message sent clandestinely to the United Nations and made public on the eve of Vietnam's Universal Periodic Review, Le Cong Cau said the authorities had cracked down on the BYM since it held training sessions on human rights education at a summer camp in 2013 (see text in annex, and video on *Quê Me* website).

2015: Memorial Day Crack-down on the UBCV

In December 2015, Police and security forces launched one of the most intensive crack-downs in recent years against the UBCV, intercepting, harassing and intimidating monks, nuns and lay-followers. The aim was to prevent the UBCV from organizing a Memorial Day commemoration at the Long Quang Pagoda in Hue on 4 December 2015. Over 100 Security Police surrounded Long Quang Pagoda, intercepting all those who attempt to enter or leave.



Police also blocked all roads leading from Highway No. 1. to Long Quang Pagoda, the Secretariat of the UBCV's Executive Institute *Viện Hóa Đạo*..

Venerable Thich Thanh Quang of Giac Minh Pagoda in Danang was summoned for interrogations by Security Police and forbidden to attend the commemorations in Hue. When he protested, they stepped up Police surveillance around his Pagoda. Venerable Thich Nguyen Ly, UBCV Treasurer and Charity Commissioner was intercepted by Police as he set off from Ho Chi Minh City with a delegation of UBCV monks and followers from the Tu Hieu Meditation Centre yesterday. They were forced to turn back, and the centre is now surrounded by Security forces. Monks and nuns from 18 UBCV Provincial Committees all over southern and central Vietnam have been similarly intercepted and placed under surveillance in their pagodas.

Members of the Buddhist Youth Movement (BYM) were also subjected to severe Police harassments. Nguyen Tat Truc, BYM Deputy leader and head of the BYM section in Hue was arrested and detained for questioning. Police accused him of participating in

an "illegal organization" (the UBCV) and of "violating the law" by signing letters on behalf of the BYM. Security Police ordered him to resign from the UBCV's Executive Institute and prohibited him from going outside Thuy Phuong district. He was explicitly forbidden to attend

Memorial Day at Long Quang Pagoda, and placed under close Police surveillance. He has also been accused of “illegal activities” and Police are now posted outside his home, frightening his young children.

Many members of the Buddhist Youth Movement were also intercepted and prevented from attending the traditional Memorial ceremony for founders of the BYM in Vietnam at the Phuoc Thanh Pagoda in Hue. Whereas this annual event usually draws hundreds of participants, only 70 BYM leaders managed to circumvent Police controls. Key members of the BYM currently subjected to harassments, surveillance and Police “working sessions” include: **Hoang Nhu Dao** (in Phuoc Dien district); Ms. Hoang Thi Hong Phuong, Van Dinh Tat and Nguyen Sac (in Quang Dien district); Ngo Duc Tien and Van Tien Nhi (in Phu vang District); Truong Dien Hieu (Huong Tra district); Nguyen Tat Truc and Nguyen Dinh Mong (Huong Thuy district).



Security Police camp day and night
outside UBCV pagodas

Lê Công Cầu, national BYM leader was placed under house arrest from 1st – 4th December 2015 until the event was over. He reported that at least 100 BYM members were placed under house arrest in the crack-down.

Arbitrary Detention of UBCV Patriarch Thich Quang Do

The situation of the UBCV’s Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do is of particular concern. Thich Quang Do is under draconian conditions of house arrest. All his visits are monitored by uniformed and plain-clothed security agents who keep round-the-clock surveillance on his monastery. Whereas Vietnam authorizes occasional visits by foreign diplomats in order to preserve their international credibility, unofficial visitors risk detention, interrogations

and Police assaults. In 2013, members of an Inter-parliamentary delegation from United Kingdom who asked to visit Thich Quang Do were told that such a visit was “unwelcome” and could jeopardize their meetings with the Ho Chi Minh City authorities. Thich Quang Do is deprived of his citizenship rights and unable to travel or communicate freely. His health is deteriorating seriously as a result of prolonged isolation and lack of regular medical care.

Politics and Religion in Vietnam

The Vietnamese government has often justified its restrictions on the UBCV members “because of their political activism”. But this pretext cannot be invoked to justify religious repression. Thich Quang Do has repeatedly stressed that religious freedom cannot exist in a void – it must be supported by the basic rights to freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression, freedom of the press as well as freedom of conscience and belief. In an appeal to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Thich Quang Do wrote:

“What can we do to bring stability, well-being and development to the people of Vietnam? During my long years in detention, I have thought deeply, and I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way – we must have true freedom and democracy in Vietnam. This is the only possible solution. We must have pluralism, the right to hold free elections, to chose our own political system, to enjoy democratic freedoms – in brief, the right to shape our own future, and the destiny of our nation. Without democracy and pluralism, we cannot combat

poverty and injustice, nor bring true development and progress to our people. Without democracy and pluralism, we cannot guarantee religious freedom or human rights, for human rights cannot be protected without the safeguards of democratic institutions and the rule of law”. .. This is why we Buddhists, as well as Vietnamese people from all walks of life, are calling urgently for freedom, democracy and human rights. The authorities try to stifle our voice by repression, imprisonment and violence. But they cannot stifle the people’s will. We shall continue our peaceful struggle. We will not stop until we realize our aspirations for democracy in Vietnam”.

UBCV Proposals and Recommendations

Concretely, the UBCV is calling on the Vietnamese Government to:

- recognize the legitimacy of the UBCV and allow the UBCV full freedom of religious activity;
- release all UBCV clergy and followers imprisoned solely on account of the nonviolent exercise or expression of their religious beliefs ;
- restore all UBCV Pagodas, administrative premises and cultural, social, medical, educational and humanitarian institutions confiscated after 1975, as well as all Pagodas and monasteries in Northern Vietnam confiscated after 1945 ;
- repeal or revise decrees and directives on religion which impose restrictions on the activities of religious organizations or submit them to Communist Party control ;
- respect and promote the fundamental rights to freedom of conscience, expression, and association as guaranteed in the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Vietnam is a State Party. ---

AUDIO MESSAGE FROM THICH QUANG DO
to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of Vietnam
sent clandestinely from the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Vietnam
Geneva, 4 February 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address this meeting at the United Nations today. My name is Thich Quang Do, I am a Buddhist monk from Vietnam. I am sorry that I cannot be with you in person – I am under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon, Vietnam. This message was recorded in secret, and it is thanks to the courage of many people that it reaches your meeting today.



Tomorrow, Vietnam will be examined at the Human Rights Council for its second Universal Periodic Review. You will hear the Vietnamese government's report on human rights. But you will not hear the voices of the victims. I am speaking here for those whose voices are stifled in Vietnam simply because of their dissenting opinions or beliefs.

My own case is a typical example. I have spent the past three decades under different forms of detention – ten years in internal exile, seven years in prison and the rest under house arrest without charge. What is my “crime”? That of calling on Vietnam to respect its people's rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, religion and belief.

When I was released from prison and placed under house arrest in 1998, I said: *“I have come from a small prison into a larger one”*. Today I am truly a prisoner in my own monastery. Police keep watch on me day and night, my communications are monitored and I cannot travel. My visitors are harassed and intercepted. I cannot even preach in my Monastery. In January 2014, my personal assistant Venerable Thich Chon Tam was assaulted by Police and ordered to leave Saigon. Vietnam's aim is to isolate me completely, cut off my contacts with the outside world, and ultimately silence my voice.

To be deprived of one's freedom is intolerable under any circumstances. To be under house arrest without charge, isolated and never knowing when you will be released, is a most cruel form of torture, both mental and physical. I have endured this for the past ten years. But I am not alone. In Vietnam today, hundreds of dissidents and human rights defenders are subjected to the torture of house arrest without any due process of law. Last year, Vietnam signed the UN Convention Against Torture. We hoped this was a step forward. But in reality, nothing has changed.

Why should Vietnam try so hard to silence us? Because the Communist regime can tolerate no criticism of the one-Party state. Since its last Universal Periodic Review, Vietnam promised to improve human rights. But on the contrary, it has launched a crack-down on critics and dissidents on an unprecedented scale. Young bloggers, journalists, defenders of worker rights, land rights, or the rights of women and children have suffered harassments and imprisonment as never before.

This crack-down has also targeted the religious communities. Religious freedom is important everywhere – it is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Bill of Rights, and also in the Vietnamese Constitution. It is a right that cannot be waived, even in times of war. But in Vietnam, religious freedom is particularly important. In the absence of opposition parties, free trade unions or

independent NGOs, the religious movements are essential voices of civil society, putting forth the people's grievances and pressing for reforms.

As head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which is not recognized by the authorities, I have not only called for religious freedom, but also for the right to multi-party democracy, to publish independent newspapers, to demonstrate freely, to express one's views without fear. I have called for abolition of the death penalty, more social equity, and the end to the system of the "hộ khẩu", or family residence permit, which is used as a tool of discrimination and control. I will continue to press for human rights and democratic freedoms in Vietnam, whatever price I have to pay.

At tomorrow's Universal Periodic Review, I call upon all governments to speak out for those whose voices are stifled in Vietnam. I urge you to press for concrete improvements, such as the recognition of the legal status of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and all other non-recognized religions, the release of religious and political prisoners, and the abolition - once and for all - of the practice of arbitrary house arrest without charge.

Thank you for your attention.

Sramana Thich Quang Do

Sureme Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam

MESSAGE FROM LE CONG CAU TO THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL in GENEVA, 2014

Distinguished guests and Human Rights Defenders,

My name is Lê Công Cầu, and I live in Hue, central Vietnam. I am a human rights defender, and head of the Buddhist Youth Movement (BYM). The BYM is an educational movement founded in the 1940s. It is modeled on the Scouts association, and is affiliated to the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Because the UBCV is not recognized by the Communist government, the BYM does not have an official status. However, our activities are tolerated because we provide much-needed education for young people. The BYM has some 300,000 members in Vietnam today.



Recently, we began to include human rights education as part of our activities. At a summer camp in central Vietnam this year, we held a seminar on Internet freedom to discuss the role of new technologies in expanding our knowledge. Vietnam is a signatory to United Nations instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and human rights are enshrined in our Constitution. We believe that young people should learn about human rights if they are to become good citizens of Vietnam.

Because of this, the authorities have begun to crack-down on our movement. I am particularly targeted. In March last year, I was arrested and interrogated non-stop for three days. Police accused me of writing articles calling for human rights and criticizing government policies. They threatened to imprison me on charges of "*circulating anti-Socialist propaganda*", a crime that carries up to 20 years in prison.

This year, on January 1st, I was arrested again at Phu Bai airport near Hue as I set off to meet members of my movement in Ho Chi Minh City. Police took me off the plane on the pretext that I was suspected of carrying “terrorist” materials in my suitcase. Of course, they found nothing, but they confiscated my laptop computer, flash-drives and cell phone and subjected me to intensive interrogations. Although I am not charged with any crime, I am now under house arrest at my home in Hue. Police are posted outside my door, and I am summoned continuously for Police interrogations. During a recent interrogation, a Security officer said he just had to sign warrant and I would be thrown into jail.

Following my arrest, several other members of the Buddhist Youth Movement in Hue were subjected to harassments. **Nguyen Tat Truc** was detained for questioning from 6 to 9 January and accused of “*violating the law*” because he signed letters on behalf of our movement. He is now under house arrest. As a result, his family is now in grave financial difficulty, because they rely on his wife’s earnings in order to survive, yet he is forbidden to drive outside his district to take her to work. Another senior BYM member, **Hoang Nhu Dao**, was interrogated by Police and also accused of “*illegal activities*”. Police are now posted outside his home, frightening his wife and young children. As I speak to you today, more than one hundred members of the Buddhist Youth Movement from Hue and the central provinces are under house arrest without any justification or charge, simply for exercising their legitimate right to association and peaceful assembly.

I am launching this message at the United Nations today as a cry of alarm. This may be my last opportunity to speak out, as I am told that I may be arrested in the coming days. I do not fear imprisonment. I take full responsibility for my legitimate and peaceful acts, and I am ready to face the consequences, whatever they may be. Last week, after 20 days under house arrest without charge, I wrote to the local Security Police protesting my arbitrary detention. I demanded that they formally indict me and put me on trial – if not, they must release me immediately. But they made no reply. I am appalled that Vietnam can treat its citizens so unfairly, and I refuse to remain silent in face of such injustice.

Human rights defenders in Vietnam today face unprecedented Police brutality, harassments and arbitrary detention simply for peacefully exercising rights that are guaranteed in our Constitution. We are accused of “anti-Socialist” activities, but in reality we are simply working to protect and promote the legitimate rights of our people, as guaranteed in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Buddhist Youth Movement is committed to education, for we believe that knowledge and understanding form the very basis of progressive and dynamic society. The right to education is enshrined in the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Vietnam is a state party. By repressing my members and prohibiting our activities, Vietnam is violating its binding commitments to its citizens and to the international community.

As you meet to consider the second Universal Periodic Review of Vietnam, I call on all governmental delegations to examine the plight of human rights defenders, and press Vietnam to take concrete steps to improve our situation. Specifically, Vietnam should bring domestic legislation into line with its international treaty commitments, and respect the principle of the harmonization of laws enshrined in the Law on the Ratification and Implementation of International Treaties adopted in 2005.

Vaguely-worded “national security” provisions in the Criminal Code such as Article 88 on “*spreading anti-Socialist propaganda*” should be repealed, for they enable the State to imprison people at will, with total impunity. Human rights must be protected by the rule of law, otherwise, they are meaningless. Vietnamese human rights defenders should be entitled to pursue their activities freely, and not be forced to live in silence and slavery by the one-Party State.

Le Cong Cau, Hue
25 January 2014