

360 young Buddhists escape Police repression to attend Summer Camp in Hue

PARIS, 12 August 2018 (VCHR - IBIB) – **Police and local authorities in Hue harassed, intimidated and intercepted members of the Buddhist Youth Movement (BYM - Gia Đình Phật tử Việt Nam) as they organized the movement’s annual Summer Camp in Huế. This new crackdown on the BYM raises serious concerns about the rights of non-registered groups such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and its member, the BYM, to conduct religious activities under Vietnam’s new Law on Belief and Religion.**

As feared, since the Law on Belief and Religion came into effect in January 2018, non-registered religious groups have become increasingly vulnerable. The law only acknowledges groups that have registered and obtained recognition by the State and provides no legal framework for the activities of non-recognized religious groups. It incorporates broad language from the Criminal Code to criminalize religious activities deemed to “undermine national security”, “harm social ethics,” “separate people following different beliefs and religions” etc. Under new administrative decrees, religious groups that engage in activities without obtaining the registration certificate stipulated in the new law risk fines of up to 30 million VNDs (US\$ 1,300), and religious cadres have been deployed nationwide to monitor and sanction those who “violate regulations on religion or belief”.

“Does Vietnam really believe that a summer camp for young children and youths is a threat to its national security?” said Võ Văn Ái, VCHR President and international spokesman of the UBCV. **“Freedom of religion or belief is a universal right. Mandatory registration is a violation of this right. Vietnam should cease harassment and intimidation of the BYM, UBCV and all other non-registered religious groups and allow them to conduct their legitimate religious activities in peace”.**

The BYM’s “Dũng - Hiếu - Hạnh” camp was held on 31st July 2018 at the UBCV’s Long Quang Pagoda in Hue. In the past, three separate camps were held for children of different ages, but because of increasing Police harassments and threats against the

children, the BYM decided to combine them into one event. The camps are held on the festival of the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Quán Thế Âm), whilst monks and nuns are engaged in their summer retreat. They are a favourite meeting place for young UBCV Buddhists who come from all over the central province and work hard to prepare the educational activities and cultural events. The summer camp is a regular target of Police repression, but this year the Police bans were particularly harsh.

Several days before the event, Police visited homes of Buddhists in **Hương Thủy, Phong Điền, Quảng Điền** and **Tả Ngạn Nội Thành, Huế**, threatening parents with reprisals if they allowed their children to attend the camp.

As early as **4.30am on 31 July**, BYM sections reported Police harassments and interception all over the province. In **Lăng Cô**, local officials, Police and plain-clothed security agents arrived at dawn to prevent children boarding a bus and forced them to disband. A second bus managed to escape by a different route, but was later also intercepted by Police. At **5.00am in Nước Ngọt** district, Police surrounded the local UBCV temple, threatening and frightening the children, and forcing their parents to take them home. BYM leaders strongly protested, but Police pushed them aside.

In **An Bằng**, Police blocked a bus full of children for several hours near Trường Hà Bridge on the pretext of a traffic incident, although other vehicles were allowed to cross. BYM team leader **Văn Tiến Nhị** tried to persuade Police to let them pass, but was finally forced to turn back. Alerted of the incident, a second bus from An Bằng took a detour through Quảng Trị and arrived in Huế by late morning. BYM sections in **An Dương, Hòa Đa Đông** in Phú Vang district suffered the same fate. Their leaders **Nguyễn Văn Đê** and **Lê Văn Thọ** were forced to turn back and prohibited from attending the “reactionary Long Quang Pagoda”.

In face of these arbitrary harassments, parents and friends of BYM members organized an *impromptu* transport network, using bicycles, motorcycles and private cars to bring their children to the camp. Many of the older members escaped Police surveillance by rapidly changing out of their uniforms and boarding buses to Huế. Despite hardships, a total of 360 young BYM members reached the camp. BYM leaders noted that this figure reflects the increase in Police repression compared with last year, when 435 members were present.

On 1st August, Police visited the homes of camp organizers **Mai Tiến Sơn** and **Nguyễn Đức Khoa**, aggressively insulting them and warning them to cut off all contacts with the UBCV and BYM. Many other BYM leaders reported they had suffered similar threats. The Head of the BYM **Lê Công Cầu** sent a letter of protest to the municipal authorities in Huế. He called on VCHR to alert the international community and condemn Police repression of such peaceful, legitimate activities.

BYM members visit UBCV Patriarch Thích Quảng Độ:

On 3rd August 2018, Most Venerable **Thích Chí Viên**, UBCV representative for Khanh Hòa province, led a group of 40 BYM children and elders to visit the UBCV Patriarch Thích Quảng Độ at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon. The group travelled 500 kilometres overnight by bus from Nha Trang, arriving in Saigon at 3.30am the next day. This is the first time such a large a delegation has been able to visit the UBCV Patriarch since he was placed under house arrest, and Thích Quảng Độ was very moved by the visit.

The Buddhist Youth Movement (*Gia Đình Phật tử Việt Nam*), is an unofficial educational organization based on the Scouts movement. Founded in 1943 and affiliated to the UBCV, it has a membership of 300,000 members nationwide in Vietnam. Their motto is “Bi - Trí - Dũng” - Compassion, Wisdom and Courage.