

At a Hearing on Human Rights and Religious Freedom at the US Congress: UBCV Spokesman Vo Van Ai tells Congress: US-based activist is assaulted for visiting Thich Quang Do - UBCV monks protest unlawful government fine

PARIS, 23 March 2010 (IBIB) - In a Written Submission to a **Congressional Hearing on Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Vietnam** at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Washington DC today, Mr. **Vo Van Ai**, International Spokesman of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) told Congress of Vietnam's strategy of "stealth repression" against the outlawed UBCV, and called on the United States to re-designate Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" for egregious religious freedom violations.

Noting that Vietnam had waged a violent campaign to eliminate the UBCV since the country's unification under Communist rule in 1975, arresting and torturing Buddhist monks and confiscating UBCV pagodas, schools, hospitals and charitable institutions, Mr Ai stated that *"today, repression against the UBCV continues unabated, but the government's strategies have changed"*. To avoid international condemnation and "hide repression from the public eye", Vietnam uses less visible methods such as house arrest, harassments and intimidation to silence and isolate UBCV leaders. *"Hundreds of UBCV pagodas are currently under Police surveillance, communications are censored, telephones are cut off, visits and movements are monitored. Police terrorize UBCV followers, warning that they may be arrested, lose their jobs, or their children be expelled from school if they frequent UBCV Pagodas. The government's Religious Security Police (cong an ton giao) control all activities"*.

"Vietnam's policy of "stealth repression" against the UBCV is extremely dangerous", Mr. Ai observed. "Although it has failed in its final objective - that of paralyzing and ultimately suppressing the UBCV - it has shifted international focus away from the serious, on-going religious persecution against this peaceful Buddhist community. In the State Department's Human Rights Report for 2009, in the section on religious and political activists detained under house arrest in Ho Chi Minh City, there is no mention of Thich Quang Do".

Not only UBCV followers, but also international figures who support the UBCV's cause are subjected to harsh treatment. In his submission, Mr. Ai announced that on **March 16th**, just last week, Mr. **Thor Halvorsen**, film producer and President of the New York-based **Human Rights Foundation** was assaulted and detained by Security Police simply because he visited **UBCV Patriarch Thich Quang Do** at the Thanh Minh

Zen Monastery. As he left the Monastery after his visit, Mr. Halvorssen was accosted by four plain-clothes Security Police. One struck a sharp blow to his back, causing him bruises, and pushed him violently. The four Policemen shouted at him loudly in English and Vietnamese, asking what he was doing at the Monastery. They then took him to a nearby Police Station for questioning. Mr. Halvorssen was interrogated by a uniformed officer wearing 5-star epaulettes. The officer asked him why he had visited the Monastery. He told Mr. Halvorssen that this was not a “real” Buddhist temple, and it was not recognized by the State. He was released after about 90 minutes. Mr. Halvorssen said that there were many plain clothed secret police as well as uniformed officials posted outside the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery.

“This incident reveals the flagrant duplicity of Vietnam’s religious policies against the outlawed UBCV”, wrote Mr. Ai. “Thich Quang Do has never been indicted, nor accused of any crime. At the United Nations and other international forums, Vietnam repeatedly denies Thich Quang Do is under detention, claiming that he is “completely free”. Yet a simple visit to Thich Quang Do is perceived as a crime, punishable by assault and intimidation.” He added: “If Vietnam does not hesitate to inflict this treatment on an international personality such as Mr. Halvorssen, it is clear that 86 million Vietnamese citizens suffer a more tragic fate”.

Mr. Ai stressed that Thich Quang Do is still under effective house arrest, after 29 years under different forms of detention. The 81 year-old UBCV leader and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize nominee is denied freedom of communication, travel, and even his citizenship rights. *“Since he was released from prison in a government amnesty in 1998, he has never been granted the obligatory residence permit (ho khau), without which he remains an illegal citizen. He is forbidden to receive his disciples or preach inside the Monastery”.* *“Thich Quang Do is a prisoner in his pagoda”* concluded Mr. Ai.

Listing instances of harassments suffered by UBCV monks in over 20 UBCV Representative Boards set up to bring spiritual and humanitarian aid to poor people in Vietnam’s Central and Southern Provinces, Mr. Ai raised the case of **Venerable Thich Vien Dinh**, UBCV Secretary General and Superior monk of the Giac Hoa pagoda in Saigon, who has been continuously subjected to interrogations and prevented from holding Buddhist ceremonies. **On March 15th 2010**, Thich Vien Dinh received a summons from the People’s Committee in Binh Thanh Ward, Saigon (Ref. 1930/QD-UBND) to pay the sum of 6 million dong for alleged administrative violations regarding the construction of a wall around the Giac Hoa pagoda. Thich Vien Dinh has strongly contested the charge, stating that he has all the necessary proof that he obtained permission from the authorities. Thich Vien Dinh intends to fight the case, and considers it as just one more unlawful pretext to impede and harass the UBCV Secretariat based at the Giac Hoa Pagoda.

In conclusion, Mr. Vo Van Ai called on the US Congress' Human Rights Commission (named after the late Tom Lantos, a well-known champion of human rights causes within the US Congress), to press Vietnam to cease repression against the UBCV and all other independent religious and political communities, and re-designate Vietnam as a **“Country of Particular Concern”** (CPC) for religious freedom violations, as recommended by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom which advises the administration and the US President on religious freedom policies.

Vietnam should be designated as a CPC, he wrote, until it re-establishes the legal status of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and other non-recognized religions, and releases UBCV Patriarch Thich Quang Do and all other UBCV Buddhists detained under house arrest because of their peaceful advocacy of religious freedom, democracy and human rights. *“The UBCV should regain full religious freedom, independent of the Communist Party and its “mass organizations” body, the Vietnam Fatherland Front, and enjoy the right to choose its own leaders without state interference. This is a litmus test of Vietnam's true commitment to an improved relationship with the United States. The promises and pledges of the Vietnamese leaders will be meaningless if they are not prepared to take these basic steps.”*

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[Persecution of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam](#)