

Buddhist monk Thich Thien Minh is victim of harassments and death threats

UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang declines to meet Thich Nhat Hanh in Binh Dinh

Buddhist monk **Thich Thien Minh**, member of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) released in a government amnesty after 26 years in re-education camp, sent an urgent communication to the **International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB)** this morning reporting that he is the victim of continuous harassments by Security Police, and has received repeated phone calls threatening him with death if he does not cease all contacts with overseas human rights organizations and stop denouncing Vietnam's human rights and religious freedom violations in the foreign media.

Thich Thien Minh, who is currently living with his young brother and his family in the southern province of Bac Lieu, told IBIB that he has been living in a state of permanent insecurity since his release on 2nd February 2005. Security Police maintain the house under 24-hour surveillance, follow him everywhere and question all his visitors. Recently, Security agents placed a jamming machine in a nearby house to prevent him using a mobile phone. All his correspondence is confiscated.

Over the past two weeks, Thich Thien Minh said he had received numerous anonymous phone calls in the middle of the night from persons who threaten to beat him up or kill him. Some warned that he would be the victim of a "car accident", then taken to hospital and injected with substances that would drive him mad, paralyse him or make him dumb. Others said he would be assaulted by gangs and beaten to death. Some of the calls, made by people speaking with Northern or Southern accents, also threatened Thich Thien Minh's brother, Huynh Huu Nghia, who is teacher in a local school. They said that he would lose his job, and that they would hire local thugs to beat, maim or kill him and his wife.

On March 23rd, a delegation of Security officials from the Ministry of Public Security in Hanoi, headed by Mr Tan, came to Bac Lieu and summoned Huynh Huu Nghia for questioning at a local hotel. On March 24th, the delegation came to visit Thich Thien Minh at his brother's home, along with a number of local Security officials. A member of the Hanoi delegation named Hiep brought a video camera and filmed the house meticulously. The Security officials told Thich Thien Minh to stop giving interviews to international radio stations and sending petitions overseas, specifically mentioning his Petition to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in which he urged the United States to maintain Vietnam on its list of "Countries of particular concern" for violations of religious freedom, and appealed for the release of prisoners of

conscience and the re-establishment of the legitimate status of the banned UBCV. They warned Thich Thien Minh that he must “bear the consequences” if the US enforced sanctions against Vietnam. They also ordered him not to reveal details about detention conditions in re-education camps or names of political prisoners to the international media and human rights organisations.

I UBCV Patriarch **Thich Huyen Quang**, 87, currently under house arrest at the Nguyen Thieu Monastery in Binh Dinh (Central Vietnam) has asked the International Buddhist Information Bureau to inform international opinion that he will not receive **Thich Nhat Hanh** and his Plum Village delegation who are coming to Binh Dinh at the end of March. Thich Nhat Hanh, a France-based Vietnamese monk, is on a 3-month speaking tour of Vietnam sponsored by the Vietnamese government and the State-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Church (VBC) with a delegation of 190 monks, nuns and followers from the sect he has founded overseas. He is scheduled to spend several days in Binh Dinh to give Dharma talks to promote his sect. Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang formally announced his refusal to receive Thich Nhat Hanh to the State-sponsored VBC’s Executive Committee in Binh Dinh on 20th March 2005.

The UBCV Patriarch had previously raised his concerns on Thich Nhat Hanh’s visit in an “Open Letter” to Communist Party Secretary Nong Duc Manh, President Tran Duc Luong, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An on 21st February 2005, in which he protested the government’s ban on Thich Quang Do travelling to Binh Dinh to visit him : *“The Communist Party and State has authorized a delegation of several hundred Buddhists from an overseas sect to visit Vietnam with full freedoms of movement and speech. Yet they prevent Buddhist monks who live in Vietnam... from travelling and spreading Buddhist teachings”*.

At the same time, monks at the famous **Thap Thap Monastery** in Binh Dinh, where Thich Nhat Hanh also planned to speak, have informed IBIB that they too have declined to receive Thich Nhat Hanh because their Superior monk Venerable **Thich Vien Dinh** is currently under house arrest. Venerable Thich Vien Dinh, who is Deputy Head of the UBCV’s Executive Institute (Vien Hoa Dao) as well as Superior monk of both the Thap Thap Monastery and Giac Hoa Pagoda in Saigon, was placed under house arrest in Saigon in October 2003 during a fierce wave of repression against the UBCV. Since then, he has been forbidden to travel and subjected to ceaseless Police harassment and surveillance. On 19th January, Thich Vien Dinh wrote to Thich Nhat Hanh expressing concern that his visit had damaging effects for religious freedom in Vietnam, especially for members of the banned UBCV, whose leaders are virtually all under house arrest. *“I don’t know if you did it deliberately or inadvertently, but in any case, you have timed your visit at a very inopportune moment [following the government crack-down on the UBCV]. It gives the impression that you are letting yourself be used as a propaganda tool to embellish the image of the regime”* .

The UBCV's Deputy leader Venerable **Thich Quang Do** also declined to receive Thich Nhat Hanh during his visit to Saigon in January-February 2005. On 18th February, Thich Quang issued a letter stating that Thich Nhat Hanh had sent envoys four times to request a meeting, but he had refused. He said that his name was not on the list of visits submitted by Thich Nhat Hanh to the Vietnamese government, and he did not want to be visited "sneakingly".

In fact, Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and other UBCV leaders are deeply concerned that Vietnam is using Thich Nhat Hanh's visit as a show-case to "prove" increased religious tolerance in Vietnam at a time when it is in fact stepping up religious repression, not only against Buddhists, but also against Mennonite Protestants, ethnic Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai followers and all the religious communities. In September 2004, Vietnam was blacklisted by the United States as a "country of particular concern" for its egregious violations of religious freedom, and it must prove within the coming weeks that it has made tangible progress in this domain. Thich Nhat Hanh's highly-publicized visit is one of the arguments used by Hanoi to support its false claims of increased respect of religious freedom.