

Despite impediments and surveillance, UN Religious Freedom Expert visits Buddhist Leader Thich Quang Do in Vietnam

PARIS, 31 July 2014 (VCHR) – At the end of an 11-day fact-finding trip to Vietnam, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief **Heiner Bielefeldt** expressed regret that he was closely followed and was unable to meet some religious groups because they were under heavy surveillance, intimidated and harassed. He was in Vietnam from 21 – 31 July. At a Press Conference in Hanoi today, he said he found serious violations of religious freedom in Vietnam.

On Friday 25 July, he managed nevertheless to visit the Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam **Thich Quang Do** to assess the current situation of the UBCV, which is not recognized by the authorities in Vietnam.

Mr. Vo Van Ai, President of the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) and UBCV International Spokesman deplored the Vietnamese governments impediments to the mission: *“In 1998, after the last UN religious rapporteur visited Vietnam, Hanoi said it would never again “accept any individuals or organizations coming to investigate religious freedom or human rights”. This time they allowed the visit, but intimidated religious groups and restricted Mr. Bielefeldts access. At least the UN Special Rapporteur was able to witness Vietnams repressive religious policies first-hand”,* he said.

Mr. Ai said the VCHR had worked hard for the visit, which was long overdue. Mr. Ai met with Mr Bielefeldt in Geneva prior to the visit, and submitted a 32-page **“Memorandum on the Religious Policies and Practices in Vietnam, and the Situation of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam”**. The document detailed the strict controls and restrictions on religions in Vietnams one-Party state, from the highest echelons of government down to grass roots level, and gave extensive details of persecution against all religious communities, including the UBCV.

The UN Special Rapporteur met Thich Quang Do at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) where the UBCV leader has been under effective house arrest since 2003. UBCV Deputy leader **Thich Nhu Dat** and **Le Cong Cau**, head of the UBCVs Buddhist Youth Movement (*Gia đình Phật tử Việt Nam*) travelled from Hue to

join the meeting.

Thich Quang Do described the systematic repression suffered by followers of the outlawed UBCV throughout 39 years of Communist rule. Vietnamese Buddhism, with its 2,000-year spiritual and cultural heritage, has been reduced to a political tool in the hands of the Communist Party, he told Mr. Bielefeldt, since the creation of the State-sponsored Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in 1981 and the effective banning of the UBCV. Thich Quang Do cited his own situation as an example of the arbitrary treatment of UBCV Buddhists all over Vietnam: thirty years in prison, internal exile and house arrest simply for peacefully demanding the respect of religious freedom. *"I am a prisoner in my own pagoda"*, he said.

Thich Nhu Dat and Le Cong Cau reported on the ongoing crack-down on the UBCV in Hue, Danang and central provinces over the past 7 months. Beginning with the government suppression of Buddhist Memorial Day celebrations in January 2014 at Long Quang Pagoda (the UBCVs Secretariat in Hue), harassments, intimidation and arbitrary detention of Buddhists have continued unabated. Over a hundred members of the Buddhist Youth Movement in central Vietnam remain under house arrest, subjected to Police interrogations and threats.

Thich Quang Do handed Mr. Bielefeldt a document on **"The Situation of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam"** prepared especially for the visit. It outlined legal restrictions on religious freedom, such as Decree 92, and also described a new strategy deployed by Hanoi – that of **"exporting religious dissent"**, as experienced by Le Cong Cau. Indeed, on the eve of Mr. Bielefeldts visit, on 8 July 2014, Police summoned Le Cong Cau to make a proposal. They offered to help him emigrate to the United States, on condition that he never returned to Vietnam. They said it was the only way he could escape prosecution. Le Cong Cau refused the offer. *"If I must choose between going to prison or leaving my country, I prefer prison"*, Le Cong Cau told the VCHR.

The document concluded with the following recommendations:

The UBCV calls on the United Nations to urge the Vietnamese Government to:

- a. implement recommendations to respect religious freedom and fundamental

human rights made at the second cycle of the UPR in February 2014;

b. fulfill its binding obligation as a member of the UN Human Rights Council to uphold the highest standards of human rights;

c. recognize the legitimacy of the UBCV and allow the UBCV full freedom of religious activity;

d. release all UBCV clergy and followers, and all other religious followers imprisoned solely on account of the nonviolent exercise or expression of their religious beliefs ;

e. repeal or revise decrees and directives on religion which impose restrictions on the activities of religious organizations or submit them to Communist Party control ;

f. 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.

The UBCV also calls on the United Nations to:

a. closely monitor the status of religious followers in prison or under house arrest and make regular visits whenever possible;

b. Ensure that all funding from UNDP and other UN aid and development agencies results in concrete progress in the respect of religious freedom and human rights, otherwise it should be withdrawn.

The UN Special Rapporteur promised the United Nations would take up the UBCVs concerns and do all possible to press Vietnam to improve the respect of religious freedom.

The **VCHR** prepared this press release after the meeting on 25 July. However, we delayed its publication on request of the UN Special Rapporteurs office, who asked that it be made public only after Mr Bielefeldt concluded his visit. ---