

AP : Dissident Vietnamese monk dies in Vietnam

HANOI, Vietnam, July 5, 2008 (AP) - Thich Huyen Quang, the patriarch of an outlawed Buddhist church in Vietnam who spent more than two decades in and out of house arrest, died Saturday after months of ailing health. He was 87.

The leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam died of multiple organ failure a day after being transferred from a hospital to his monastery at his request, said Penelope Faulkner of the International Buddhist Information Bureau in Paris, which speaks for the outlawed church.

An outspoken proponent of religious freedom and human rights, Quang had long been confined to the Nguyen Thieu Monastery in the southern province of Binh Dinh.

"He was a real pioneer, and that's why Vietnam kept him isolated and they wanted to keep him out of the way," she said. "He kept determined to the very end."

The church's deputy leader, Thich Quang Do, 80, broke out of house arrest at his monastery in Ho Chi Minh City to be at Quang's side when the patriarch was hospitalized, Faulkner said. Do held a prayer service after Quang's death and plans to oversee a funeral scheduled for next week, she said.

Buddhist monk Thich Minh Tuan said Quang's followers are preparing a "simple but solemn funeral" and he will be buried at the pagoda.

"He passed away very peacefully with many of his followers at his bedside," Tuan said.

State-controlled media over the past few days have accused Do, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and other senior members of the banned church of attempting to use Quang's death for "personal political gains."

The Buddhist sect was effectively banned in 1981 when it refused to merge with the state-sponsored Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

Vietnam's Communist government allows only a handful of officially approved religious groups to worship, outlawing all other sects.

Despite the longtime standoff with the government, there were signs of a thaw in relations in 2003 when Quang had an unprecedented meeting with then-Prime Minister Phan Van Khai in Hanoi.

But six months later, the government launched a new crackdown after the Unified Buddhists held a meeting to elect a new church leadership. Quang and Do were accused of possessing official papers with national secrets.

Since then, both monks were mostly confined to their respective monasteries, their followers say. The government denied they have been under house arrest.

Buddhism is the primary religion among Vietnam's 86 million people. The government has also clashed with other religions in recent years, mostly for political activities. It has sentenced Roman Catholics, Protestants and followers of other religions to lengthy jail sentences.