

## ***dpa*: U.S. religious commission is slander, says Hanoi**

HANOI, February 15, 2001 (dpa) - Vietnam on Thursday criticised a U.S. review into religious freedom in the communist-ruled nation, calling it an "*unacceptable*" interference in Vietnam's internal affairs.

*"That the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom gives itself the right to pass judgments on religious situations in other countries is a gross interference in internal affairs of other countries,"* Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Phan Thuy Thanh said.

*"This is unacceptable,"* she told reporters.

Thanh's statements followed the Tuesday commission meeting in Washington in which some sources urged that the U.S. Congress attach human and religious rights conditionality to a landmark bilateral trade agreement signed last summer.

*"What would the general public think if such an agreement is subject to fabrications and slanders by those who deliberately go counter to aspirations and common interest of Vietnam and the United States,"* Thanh said.

The commission heard testimony from Vo Van Ai, an exiled spokesman of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), whose in-country leadership has said it wants human rights conditionality attached to the trade agreement.

*"Pressure for human rights and democracy must be an integral part of the U.S. trade relationship with Vietnam,"* Ai told the commission.

*"The benefits of bilateral trade should not be given free, and Vietnam must be made to earn them by respecting its citizens' rights,"* he added.

Ai said the pact should contain specific clauses and provisions for a "*range of concrete sanctions*" should Hanoi fail to meet a certain level of religious freedom as outlined by the commission.

Several economists have said the bilateral trade agreement, signed in Washington after four years of tortuous negotiations, would be the most important step towards improving Vietnam's economy.

Hanoi has consistently opposed attaching conditions to the pact.

Vietnam has experienced strong waves of ethnic unrest in the central highlands this month, mainly by minority Christians upset by continuing encroachment on their traditional lands.

The unrest which left dozens and perhaps hundreds injured, including police, was said to have been stoked by religious tension.

Vietnam can expect further criticism on the religion front from its former battlefield foe, as the State Department's annual human rights report is expected to be released in March. dpa mm js