

Hanoi's interference in UBCV Patriarch's funeral draws strong protests from the international community

PARIS, 10 July 2008 (IBIB) – As members of the **Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam** prepare the funeral ceremony for the late Supreme Patriarch **Thich Huyen Quang**, to be held at 7.00am on Friday 11th July at the Nguyen Thieu Monastery in Binh Dinh, international protests are mounting against the Vietnamese government's attempt to impose a State-sponsored funeral and discredit UBCV Deputy leader **Thich Quang Do** by denunciation campaigns in the State-controlled media.

Today (10 July) three prominent U.S. Congressmen, **Edward Royce**, **Chris Smith** and **Frank Wolf** wrote jointly to Vietnamese President **Nguyen Minh Triet** in Hanoi deploring that: *“Despite [Thich Huyen Quang's] respected positions with the UBCV and his decades of dedication and leadership, we are now informed that the Vietnamese government has intervened in the planning of the funeral, announcing that the State-sanctioned Buddhist Church will organize the funeral rather than the UBCV. We strongly disagree with this decision and urge its reversal”.*

“Furthermore, the denunciations of the Venerable Thich Quang Do and other so-called “extremist elements disguised as Buddhist monks” by the government-controlled media are troubling and frankly untrue. The Venerable Do is not an extremist as he has been characterized, but rather retains his standing within the Buddhist community as a well respected citizen and a strong leader. The Venerable Thich Quang Do and hundreds of members of the Unified Buddhist Church have been mourning the death of their leader in various ceremonies. We strongly urge you to respect their beliefs and allow [them] to organize and attend the Venerable Quang's funeral without interference”.

In a letter faxed to the **International Buddhist Information Bureau** to the attention of UBCV Deputy leader Thich Quang Do today, **Therese Jebsen**, Executive Director of the Norwegian **Rafto Foundation** wrote: *“The Rafto Foundation strongly condemns the attempt by the Vietnamese government to wrest control over the funeral ceremony of Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang. We also react with anger and sorrow knowing that the Government-controlled media has run denunciation campaigns against You and your followers. This is an additional sign of the brutal and repressive nature of the illegitimate regime in Hanoi.”* Ms Jebsen, whose foundation awarded Thich Quang Do the prestigious Rafto Prize in 2006, was arrested at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon in March 2007 when she went to hand the Rafto Diploma to Thich Quang Do.

“The Rafto Foundation realizes that the burden on Your shoulders will become even more heavy in the months and years to come” she wrote to the UBCV Deputy leader. “We will continue to support You and the Vietnamese peoples’ struggle for democracy, freedom and human rights”. The death of the UBCV Patriarch was “as a tragic loss for all Vietnamese who are persecuted and subjected to human rights violations. It is also a loss for people around the world who are committed to the struggle for human rights and democracy. Thich Huyen Quang will be remembered as a shining example, representing the noblest values of human beings” she said.

From Paris, the President of the **International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH)** **Souhayr Belhassen** and **Vietnam Committee on Human Rights’** President **Vo Van Ai** sent a joint letter of protest to Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet: *“FIDH and VCHR denounce State interference into the UBCV’s internal affairs as a grave violation of the right to freedom of religion and belief enshrined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Vietnam is a state party. We express our disappointment as these actions are especially shocking from a country that holds the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council. FIDH and VCHR call upon Vietnam to immediately withdraw all plans for a State-organised funeral. UBCV Deputy leader Thich Quang Do and UBCV members should be fully entitled to mourn their leader and conduct religious rites without any political interference in respect of international human rights standards on the right to freedom of religion and belief”.*

The London-based headquarters of **Amnesty International** also issued a strong statement today *“call[ing] on the Viet Nam authorities to allow his funeral to take place according to the wishes of his followers and church, without hindrance and harassment of UBCV members by agents of the state”.* Thich Huyen Quang was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience since 1990, and AI sections in Belgium, Canada, France, Austria, Netherlands and the USA had sent thousands of letters calling for his release.

Ms **Kathryn Cameron Porter**, President of the **Leadership Council for Human Rights** in Washington D.C. expressed *“solidarity with the UBCV in its peaceful struggle to worship freely”*, in a letter addressed to Venerable Thich Quang Do on 9th July. *“The Leadership Council joins the international community in calling on the Vietnamese leadership to end its restrictions on religious freedom, including unjust restrictions placed on the UBCV and its leadership. We hope that Ambassador Michalak will personally attend Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang’s funeral, and that the memorial services will be organized according to the Church’s wishes, without government interference. As we mourn the death of this great man, we honour his life and his powerful legacy”.*