

Police threaten and harass UBCV Buddhists and Youth leaders during Vesak celebrations in Hue

PARIS 12th May 2017 (VCHR) – Members of the **Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam** (UBCV) and its affiliated **Buddhist Youth Movement** (*Gia đình Phật tử Việt Nam*) were subjected to threats, harassments and Police interrogations as they organized celebrations of Vesak Day (Birth of Buddha) in the ancient capital of Huế, central Vietnam.

“For Buddhists around the world, Vesak Day is a celebration of peace and joy. Yet in Vietnam, it is marred by harassments and discrimination”, said VCHR President Võ Văn Ái. ***“The government claims progress in religious freedom with the adoption of a recent law, but on the ground, the reality of religious repression remains unchanged”.***

Lê Công Cầu, the UBCV’s Secretary-general and head of the Buddhist Youth Movement, sent a report to the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights today describing a series of Police restrictions, interrogations and threats against UBCV Buddhists in the run-up to the Vesak, especially in Phú Vang district, Huế, where the UBCV has a strong and active presence.

On 28 April 2017, Security Police summoned two leaders of the Buddhist Youth Movement (BYM), **Ngô Đức Tiến** and **Nguyễn Văn Đê**, both members of the BYM Central Committee, for interrogation at the Phú Vang Police headquarters. They threatened to detain the two men, warning that (a) the UBCV was an illegal organization (b) participating in UBCV activities was a violation of the law (c) they must renounce membership of the UBCV and (d) they must not attend the UBCV’s Vesak ceremony at the Long Quang Pagoda in Huế. The two youth leaders protested that there was no formal ban against the UBCV, and it was therefore a legitimate organization, and refused Police pressure to sign a statement admitting their “wrongdoings”. On **4th May 2017**, Lê Công Cầu was summoned for “working sessions” by Security Police for a whole day. He was also pressured to cease his involvement with the “illegal” UBCV. During this period, Police and local officials visited homes of local Buddhists and warned them not to attend the UBCV Vesak ceremony.

Police interference into celebrations of a traditional religious festival such as Vesak demonstrates the deep contradictions in Vietnam’s religious policies. The government claims to have improved protection of religious freedom, notably with the adoption of a new Law on Belief and Religion that comes into force in January 2018, yet it imposes strict state controls on religious communities and arbitrarily represses non-registered groups such as the UBCV. In an [Open Letter](#) to Vietnam’s National Assembly last year,

54 religious and civil society organisations inside and outside Vietnam called for amendments to the new law because it placed *“unacceptable restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights”*, and was *“contrary to the spirit and principle of the right to freedom of religion and belief”*.

UBCV Patriarch Thích Quảng Độ has clearly stated that the UBCV will not apply to register with the communist state. He esteems that the UBCV has a long-standing legitimate status, and moreover that mandatory registration is a violation of international law.

Indeed, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, stressed after his [visit to Vietnam](#) that *“the right to freedom of religion or belief is a universal right which can never be “created” by administrative procedures. Rather, it is the other way around: registration should be an offer by the State but not a compulsory legal requirement”*.