

Prague Bishop Vaclav Maly calls for the immediate release of Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and Father Nguyen Van Ly

Prague Catholic **Bishop Vaclav Maly**, President of the Justice and Peace Commission at the Czech Bishop's Conference, former dissident and signatory of the Czech Charter 77 has sent a letter to Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong calling for the immediate release of three prominent religious prisoners, Venerable **Thich Huyen Quang**, Patriarch of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), his Deputy **Thich Quang Do** and Roman Catholic priest **Father Nguyen Van Ly**. This is the first time a high-ranking Roman Catholic dignitary has publicly spoken out in support of religious dissidents in Vietnam.

The letter, handed in person to the Vietnamese Ambassador in Prague, was sent in response to an appeal launched by **Vo Van Ai**, Director of the International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB). Mr. Ai visited Bishop Maly in April 2003 when he was invited by the Czech **People in Need Foundation** to accept the **Homo Homini Human Rights Prize** awarded to Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and Father Nguyen Van Ly.

Speaking of UBCV Patriarch **Thich Huyen Quang** and Venerable **Thich Quang Do**, **Bishop Maly** wrote : *"These courageous leaders have spent most of the past 25 years detained without charge or trial for peacefully defending fundamental human rights and religious freedom"*. Both monks were battling serious health problems caused by prolonged detention and lack of medical care, he said, and Thich Quang Do was detained under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery simply for launching a peaceful "Appeal for Democracy in Vietnam". Bishop Maly expressed grave concern for the health of Father Nguyen Van Ly, sentenced to 15 years prison in 2001 *"as a result of his criticism of the condition of human and religious rights"*. The detention of all three men, he said, was *"at variance with the United Nations' Covenant on Civil and Political Rights"*.

Drawing from his experience as a political prisoner in Communist Czechoslovakia and leading figure of the "Velvet Revolution" alongside former President Vaclav Havel, Bishop Maly warned President Luong of the consequences of political repression : ***"By violating their fundamental human rights and freedoms, a temporary isolation and silence of inconvenient individuals can be achieved. However, such actions will eventually create grounds for the instability of the whole society forced to dissimulation, which might overflow into violent and uncontrollable reactions of the humiliated citizens"***.

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Bishop Maly also sent personal letters of solidarity to the three religious dissidents in Vietnam. *"I admire the personal effort with which you struggle for dialogue, toleration and democracy in Vietnamese society despite persecution... [and] remain spiritually connected with your effort for a world which is more just"* he told Venerable Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do. In a letter to Father Ly addressed to the Ba Sao Prison Camp where the priest is currently detained, Bishop Maly said : *"Even though you have been living through the solitude and disgrace of imprisonment, I want to assure you that you have not been forgotten"*. Since all three men are currently in prison or house arrest, Bishop Maly sent a copy of the letters to Mr. Vo Van Ai, asking him to forward them through underground channels.

An outspoken advocate of civil liberties and human rights, Bishop Maly is a 1998 European Human Rights Prize laureate. He has travelled extensively to support victims of human rights abuses around the world.