

AFP : Rights group says detained Vietnamese monk needs urgent surgery

Agence France Presse

HANOI, Feb 18 (AFP) - An overseas Vietnamese human rights group appealed Tuesday for the elderly head of a banned Buddhist church to be released from house arrest for surgery on a feared cancerous growth.

In a letter sent to Vietnam's top leaders, Vo Van Ai, president of the Paris-based Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, said Thich Huyen Quang, head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), needed urgent treatment.

"I urge you to formally release the Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang and allow him to travel to Ho Chi Minh City," Ai said.

"It is not only the Patriarch's existence that is at stake, but also the life and death of our nation's very essence, that of independent Buddhism in Vietnam."

Quang, 85, has been kept under effective house arrest near the Quang Phuoc Pagoda in the remote central province of Quang Ngai since 1982.

Hanoi banned the UBCV in 1981 after it refused to come under the control of the state-sanctioned Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

Doctors at Quang Ngai hospital examined Quang last week and said the growth near his eye could be cancerous. Due to their inadequate facilities, they recommended that he undergo urgent surgery in Ho Chi Minh City, Ai said.

However, on Wednesday last week Quang Ngai police denied permission for the monk, who is also suffering from high blood pressure, chronic arthritis and stomach ulcers, to travel to the southern business capital, he added.

Vietnamese government officials could not be immediately contacted for comment.

The church's number two leader, Thich Quang Do, was placed under house arrest for two years in June 2001 for launching an "Appeal for Democracy in Vietnam" and planning to lead a UBCV delegation to escort Quang to Ho Chi Minh City for medical treatment.

Last week, Chris Patten, the European Union's External Relations Commissioner, urged the communist regime to release the two monks.

Do, 74, had previously spent 18 years in prison and under house arrest on charges of "abusing democratic rights and freedoms to harm the state".

Human rights groups have long charged Vietnam with smothering all dissent and routinely jailing democracy activists, critics of the regime and church leaders who do not recognise the state's authority.

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