

## **“Sacrificing principles for profits” : Vo Van Ai regrets US State Department’s decision to withdraw Vietnam from list of Countries of Particular Concern**

PARIS, 14 November 2006 (IBIB) - Mr. **Vo Van Ai**, Director of the **International Buddhist Information Bureau** and International Spokesman of the **outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam** (UBCV) expressed his deep regret at the US State Department’s decision to withdraw Vietnam from the blacklist of “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPCs). *“Nothing has changed since Vietnam was placed on the CPC list in 2004”,* said Vo Van Ai. *“Religious followers of all denominations, especially followers of non-recognized religious groups live in constant fear, subjected to daily harassments, detention, Police surveillance and intimidation”.*

*“The US has sacrificed principles for profits by removing Vietnam from the CPC list on the eve of the APEC Summit. Religious followers in Vietnam and around the world are shocked to see America washing its hands on the plight of millions of Vietnamese suffering persecution for their peaceful religious beliefs”.*

Regarding the outlawed **Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam** (UBCV), US Ambassador-at-large on International Religious Freedom, John V. Hanford, stated that UBCV leaders suffered restrictions *“because they expressed political views that the government finds threatening”.* Vo Van Ai strongly rejected this view. *“Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and other UBCV leaders have simply called upon the Vietnamese government to implement the human rights and freedoms enshrined in the Vietnamese Constitution and the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Vietnam acceded in 1982. The UBCV has absolutely no political agenda. By repeating Hanoi’s “political” perceptions against the UBCV, Ambassador Hanford is unwittingly encouraging Vietnam in its policies of suppressing all independent religious voices in Vietnam”.*

Ambassador Hanford praised Vietnam’s release of religious prisoners such as UBCV monk Thich Thien Minh. Vo Van Ai noted that Thich Thien Minh was released just 3 months before completing his prison sentence, after being detained arbitrarily in a labour camp for 26 years simply for supporting the banned UBCV. Moreover, Thich Thien Minh and other religious prisoners such as Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang continue to suffer threats and harassments after their release.

Responding to Ambassador Hanford’s reports on improvements in the registration of religious communities, notably Protestant congregations and “house churches”, Vo

Van Ai noted that only a modest number of house churches have been registered. Moreover, registration does not signify legalization : house churches are obliged to renew their registration every year, their activities are restricted to limited geographical areas, and they must submit full lists of their members to the authorities. In many cases, the government places “observers” to monitor church activities or force leadership changes. Over 4,000 house churches are not yet registered. Some 500 have applied for registration, but have not received a government decision. Local authorities in Hai Duong Province, for example, use administrative measures to mistreat Christians, e.g. denial of citizenship rights, residence permits, denial of passport for travel or work overseas. Despite new laws prohibiting forced recantations, reports from the Central and Northern Highlands indicate that Montagnards and other ethnic Christians continue to be pressured and even tortured to renounce their faith.