The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam holds Assembly in Saigon

PARIS, 4 December 2012 (IBIB) – Leaders of the **Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam** (UBCV) gathered at the Giac Hoa Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) from 30 November to 1 December 2012 for a special assembly to report on activities and discuss strategies for the coming year.

The UBCV, which was effectively banned in 1981 after the creation of the State-sponsored Vietnam Buddhist Sanga (VBS) is perceived as an *"illegal organisation"* by the Vietnamese authorities and cannot freely conduct religious activities. **UBCV leader Thich Quang Do** therefore took the opportunity of a memorial service for 17th Century Patriarch Nguyen Thieu to convene this rare meeting.

UBCV Patriarch Thich Quang Do with senior UBCV officials meeting in Giac Hoa Pagoda - Photo IBIB

Despite Police surveillance and harassments, senior UBCV dignitaries from 20

Provincial Committees in central and southern Vietnam and leaders of the UBCV Buddhist Youth Movement came to Saigon for the assembly, travelling separately and on different days to avoid Police controls. During the meeting, Security Police kept permanent surveillance inside and outside Giac Hoa Pagoda, especially on 1 December, the day of the Memorial Service, when hundreds of uniformed Security Police, plain-clothed agents and local officials surrounded the Pagoda's entrance, threatening and alarming Buddhist followers.

At the Assembly, the UBCV adopted a **"Declaration on the state of the country and the situation of human rights"** signed by Patriarch Thich Quang Do. The declaration expressed the UBCV's concern about the rising problems in Vietnamese society, such as *"the decline in morality, an uncaring society, escalating social problems, an alarming poverty gap and a lack of individual freedoms and rights."* The UBCV blamed this *"deplorable situation"* on a number of factors:

"The human rights situation is abysmal" with a *"fierce, ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression"* and harsh prison sentences against bloggers, journalists, human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists; with widespread violations of religious freedom under *"a policy of religious intolerance, meticulously planned and orchestrated at the highest levels of the state"* which targets all religious communities including the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Catholics, Protestants and the UBCV, whose 20 Representative Boards *"are a particular target of repression"* in particular the Giac Minh Pagoda in Danang;

Buddhist Youth Movement leader Le Cong Cau reports on the movement's activities - Photo IBIB

"The security of our country is under threat" *as "China inexorably extends its claims on Vietnamese sovereign waters, islands and lands"*. The UBCV strongly criticized Hanoi's submissive attitude to China, citing the silence of the Vietnamese delegation at the recent ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh on proposals for a multilateral solution to the South China Sea conflict, Hanoi's tepid reaction to Beijing's printing of passports with the nine-dashed line included in Chinese territories, and its silence on Beijing's publication of a map of the newly-established Chinese prefecture of "Shansha" on the Spratly and Paracel islands.

Plain-clothed Security Police keep watch inside the Pagoda - Photo IBIB

Officer Tot (white shirt) of the Binh Thanh Ward Security Police infiltrates the assembly - Photo IBIB

"China is carefully and meticulously preparing its incursion into Vietnamese lands and seas" said the UBCV, *"Yet, despite the urgent warnings and appeals of hundreds of Vietnamese personalities and intellectuals, Hanoi remains impervious. Indeed, it even seems to be conniving with China, like a Trojan horse ready to facilitate a new era of Chinese domination of Vietnam in the 21st century"*.

Exhorting all Vietnamese to take their part of responsibility, the UBCV said: *"Vietnam belongs to the Vietnamese people. No Vietnamese can turn a blind eye when the country is threatened by foreign aggression, endangered by the connivance of its own submissive government and threatened by the indecision and lack of resolve of a number of Vietnamese intellectuals"* said the UBCV.

To seek a solution to these problems, **the UBCV called on the Vietnamese Communist Party and government**:

> a) To defend Vietnam's sovereignty by publicly supporting *a multilateral solution* of the South China Sea conflict, with the participation of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan and China;

b) To bring the South China Sea issue before the United Nations, based on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the provisions of the ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the ASEAN Code of Conduct (COC - *Guidelines for Implementation of the DOC*);

c) To initiate a transition to multiparty democracy in order to ensure the adherence and support of all sectors of Vietnam's 90 million population in the struggle to preserve national sovereignty;

Monks celebrate the Memorial service - Photo IBIB

Patriarch Thich Quang Do and UBCV delegates at the lunch break Photo IBIB

On Vietnamese people and Buddhists inside the country:

a) To free themselves from fear and stand up to defend their country and basic human rights. *"After 70 years of oppression under communist rule, fear has become a second nature for the people. We must cast away the fear that has paralyzed our people since communism came to Vietnam"*;

b) To reconcile differences between different sectors of society: *"Over the past 70 years, the Communist Party's pervasive propaganda has deceived and divided our people, creating false rifts between North and South, communists and nationalists. Even today, these divisions remain rooted in our minds. Blinded by suspicion and distrust, we see only our differences, but we do not recognize each other for what we really are – the children of Vietnam, united by a common heritage of 4,000 years of civilization and 2,000 years of history"*;

On Vietnamese people and Buddhists overseas:

a) To campaign actively in international fora to alert world opinion to the situation in Vietnam;

b) To organize a worldwide Congress of Vietnamese with representatives of the different religions, opposition parties, civil society movements as well as academics and intellectuals *"to devise a common strategy for the democratization of Vietnam"*.

In conclusion, Patriarch Thich Quang Do stressed that *"the UBCV does not engage in politics. However, it is ready to support any peaceful political activity genuinely aimed at protecting the country and promoting the welfare, social justice, freedom and human rights of the Vietnamese people… The UBCV also strongly encourages Buddhist lay-followers to do their part by actively engaging in the country's political affairs in a spirit of solidarity and equality"*. He called on Vietnamese at home and abroad to form an *"Alliance against Foreign Aggression"* to safeguard the sovereignty and freedom of Vietnam.