

UBCV leader Thich Quang Do: Message to the United Nations Human Rights Council

PARIS, 11 February 2014 (Vietnam Committee) – The **Vietnam Committee on Human Rights** is honoured to present exclusive audio messages by prominent dissident Thich Quang Do, leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), and **Le Cong Cau**, head of the UBCV-affiliated Buddhist Youth Movement. The messages were made public at a meeting on **“Banned Civil Society Voices”** at the United Nations in Geneva on Tuesday 4 February 2014, organized by the VCHR and the **International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH)**.

Thich Quang Do, Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church in Vietnam (UBCV) and 2014 Nobel Peace prize nominee, sent this message in English from the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery where he has been under *de facto* house arrest since 2003:

MESSAGE FROM THICH QUANG DO

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address this meeting at the United Nations today. My name is Thich Quang Do, I am a Buddhist monk from Vietnam. I am sorry that I cannot be with you in person – I am under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon, Vietnam. This message was recorded in secret, and it is thanks to the courage of many people that it reaches your meeting today.

Tomorrow, Vietnam will be examined at the Human Rights Council for its second Universal Periodic Review. You will hear the Vietnamese government’s report on human rights. But you will not hear the voices of the victims. I am speaking here for those whose voices are stifled in Vietnam simply because of their dissenting opinions or beliefs.

My own case is a typical example. I have spent the past three decades under different forms of detention – ten years in internal exile, seven years in prison and the rest under house arrest without charge. What is my “crime”? That of calling on Vietnam to respect its people’s rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, religion and belief.

When I was released from prison and placed under house arrest in 1998, I said: *“I have come from a small prison into a larger one”*. Today I am truly a prisoner in my own

monastery. Police keep watch on me day and night, my communications are monitored and I cannot travel. My visitors are harassed and intercepted. I cannot even preach in my Monastery. In January 2014, my personal assistant Venerable Thich Chon Tam was assaulted by Police and ordered to leave Saigon. Vietnam's aim is to isolate me completely, cut off my contacts with the outside world, and ultimately silence my voice.

To be deprived of one's freedom is intolerable under any circumstances. To be under house arrest without charge, isolated and never knowing when you will be released, is a most cruel form of torture, both mental and physical. I have endured this for the past ten years. But I am not alone. In Vietnam today, hundreds of dissidents and human rights defenders are subjected to the torture of house arrest without any due process of law. Last year, Vietnam signed the UN Convention Against Torture. We hoped this was a step forward. But in reality, nothing has changed.

Why should Vietnam try so hard to silence us? Because the Communist regime can tolerate no criticism of the one-Party state. Since its last Universal Periodic Review, Vietnam promised to improve human rights. But on the contrary, it has launched a crack-down on critics and dissidents on an unprecedented scale. Young bloggers, journalists, defenders of worker rights, land rights, or the rights of women and children have suffered harassments and imprisonment as never before.

This crack-down has also targeted the religious communities. Religious freedom is important everywhere – it is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Bill of Rights, and also in the Vietnamese Constitution. It is a right that cannot be waived, even in times of war. But in Vietnam, religious freedom is particularly important. In the absence of opposition parties, free trade unions or independent NGOs, the religious movements are essential voices of civil society, putting forth the people's grievances and pressing for reforms.

As head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which is not recognized by the authorities, I have not only called for religious freedom, but also for the right to multi-party democracy, to publish independent newspapers, to demonstrate freely, to express one's views without fear. I have called for abolition of the death penalty, more social equity, and the end to the system of the "hộ khẩu", or family residence permit, which is used as a tool of discrimination and control. I will continue to press for human rights and democratic freedoms in Vietnam, whatever price I have to pay.

At tomorrow's Universal Periodic Review, I call upon all governments to speak out for those whose voices are stifled in Vietnam. I urge you to press for concrete improvements, such as the recognition of the legal status of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and all other non-recognized religions, the release of religious and

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political prisoners, and the abolition - once and for all - of the practice of arbitrary house arrest without charge.

Thank you for your attention.

Thich Quang Do