

UBCV Spokesman Vo Van Ai welcomes the U.S. International Religious Freedom Report and calls for stronger action to promote religious freedom in Vietnam

PARIS, 19 November 2010 (IBIB) - Mr. **Vo Van Ai**, International Spokesman of the **Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam** (UBCV) and Director of its Paris-based information office, the **International Buddhist Information Bureau**, welcomed the U.S. State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom made public by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton this Wednesday.

Commending the Report's 26-page chapter on religious freedom violations in Vietnam, he urged the United States to take stronger steps to promote freedom of religion or belief in this country. He also applauded the recommendations by the **US Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF), the independent body which makes recommendations to the US Administration on religious freedom policies, to re-designate Vietnam as a **"Country of Particular Concern"** for its egregious violations of freedom of religion and belief. Vietnam, which was on the CPC blacklist in 2004 and 2005, was removed by President Bush in 2006, in preparation for Vietnam's membership of the World Trade Organization (1). The Obama administration will make public its list of countries designated as CPCs at the beginning of 2011.

"Religious freedom is fundamental everywhere" said Vo Van Ai, "But it is especially important in one-Party, authoritarian states like Vietnam, where the prohibition of opposition parties, independent NGOs and all forms of alternative thinking has created an ideological vacuum. Today, independent religious forces are the sole surviving voices of civil society. As such, they are the target of unabated repression by the Vietnamese regime".

Concerning the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which is not recognized by the Communist government in Vietnam, despite its 2,000-year tradition and widespread following, Mr. Vo Van Ai stressed that its situation was far more serious than the U.S. State Department's report revealed. For example, the UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do had never, as the US State Department's report affirmed, *"traveled without difficulty to Quoc An Pagoda in Hue and delivered a sermon to approximately 700 followers"* during the Vesak Festival (Birth of Buddha). On the contrary, Patriarch Thich Quang Do, who remains under effective house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon, has not been allowed to preach publicly since 1975, even inside his own monastery.

In a recent interview for Radio Free Asia on 15.11.2010, Thich Quang Do compared his situation to that of Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Ky, released from house arrest on 13th November: *“Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was arbitrary and undemocratically detained, but at least the military junta maintained a semblance of legality. They read out the sentence condemning her to house arrest, and when it was completed, they removed the barriers around her house, and read out the declaration of her release. In Vietnam, the government doesn’t even bother with this masquerade. They detain me without any justification or trial. That way, they don’t have to justify my condition to the international community. Even when I go to hospital for my monthly visits, the Police follow me, and all my communications are monitored. I know the government’s intent – they want to keep me here until I die”.*

Thich Quang Do recalled that all his visits are monitored – in March 2010 Thor Halvorssen, President of the New York-based Human Rights Foundation, was beaten and temporarily detained by Security Police after visiting Thich Quang Do (2). Security Police told Halvorssen that he should not visit the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery, as it was an “illegal” pagoda. Later, a Japanese monk was fined the equivalent of US\$1,000 at Tan Son Nhat airport for the “crime” of paying his respects to the detained UBCV Patriarch.

Mr. Vo Van Ai also urged the United States to monitor Vietnam’s practices of “*stealth repression*” against religious movements such as the UBCV. In order to avoid international condemnation, he said, Vietnam uses sophisticated, covert methods to silence and isolate UBCV monks and nuns, cutting off their contacts with the population and depriving them of the traditional offerings which ensure their livelihood. All over the country, Security Police visit UBCV followers, threatening that they will make them lose their jobs or have their children expelled from school if they continue to attend UBCV pagodas, thus creating a pervasive climate of fear.

Mr Ai urged Michael Posner, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, to monitor this situation closely during his visit to Vietnam in December 2010 for the annual human rights dialogue between the US and Vietnam, and follow the recommendations of the USCIRF to re-designate Vietnam as a **Country of Particular Concern** for its systematic violations of religious freedom and human rights.

Justifying its recommendations after the publication of the State Department’s report this week, the USCIRF declared: ***“The government of Vietnam continues its systematic and egregious violation of freedom of religion and belief. There continue to be arrests and beatings of religious leaders; forced closure of pagodas, churches, and religious meetings; violence directed at Buddhist communities; and arrests and a beating death experienced by the Catholic***

community of Con Dau. USCIRF has concluded that these facts meet the CPC threshold and recommends that the United States designate Vietnam again [as a Country of Particular Concern]."

(1) See ["Sacrificing principles for profits" : Vo Van Ai regrets US State Department's decision to withdraw Vietnam from list of Countries of Particular Concern](#) (14 November 2006)

(2) See ["At a Hearing on Human Rights and Religious Freedom at the US Congress: UBCV Spokesman Vo Van Ai tells Congress: US-based activist is assaulted for visiting Thich Quang Do - UBCV monks protest unlawful government fine"](#) (23 March 2010)