

Message from Very Venerable Thich Quang Do to the UN Commission on Human Rights

This Message by the Very Venerable Thich Quang Do, Deputy leader of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, is addressed to the 61st Session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. It was originally recorded on video, filmed secretly at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon where Thich Quang Do is under house arrest. Unfortunately, however, as UBCV monk Thich Vien Phuong brought the message out of the Monastery on 30th March, political police arrested him and confiscated the video (see [IBIB Press Release, 30 mars 2005](#)). The next day, at great personal risk, UBCV Buddhists taped the message a second time on sound recording. They smuggled it to the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights just in time for us to release it publicly at the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a great pleasure to be able to address you today and join my voice with yours to discuss the building of a world based on freedom and human rights.

“Human rights” means the right of every human being to live as free and respected members of society. But in Vietnam today we are not free. We are prisoners in our own country, in our pagodas, in our homes. Prisoners of a regime which decides who has the right to speak and who must keep silent. Who has the right to freedom, and who must be detained. We are prisoners of a regime, which, 30 years after the end of the Vietnam War, continues to fight a battle against its own people and deprive them of their basic human rights.

For the past 30 years, the communist authorities have sought to stifle all independent voices in Vietnam. Today, we have no opposition parties, no free press, no free trade unions, no civil society. All independent religions are banned. All citizens who call for political reform, democracy or human rights risk immediate arrest.

Because we refuse to accept this, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam has been systematically repressed. Our Church is outlawed, our leaders arrested, our followers harassed. For more than twenty-five years, the Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and I have been imprisoned or exiled, simply for demanding the people's basic human rights. As I speak to you today, I am under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon. Secret Police keep watch on me day and night. My telephone is cut, my communications are monitored, and I am forbidden to travel. This message was recorded in secret, and Buddhists followers took great risks to send it to the International Buddhist Information Bureau and the Vietnam Human Rights Committee in Paris, who helped bring it to your gathering today.

The communist government claims that we do not need freedom, that by opening Vietnam's markets they can fulfill the people's needs. But their policy of "doi moi" - economic opening under authoritarian control, has failed disastrously, and led to serious human rights abuses. State corruption, power abuse, social injustice, exploitation and forced labour are widespread. The poverty gap is rocketing, and social problems such as juvenile crime, drug addiction, AIDS, child prostitution and trafficking in women are rife. In a society with no rule of law, no independent judiciary, the people have no recourse against these evils, and live in permanent insecurity, hardship and fear.

What can we do to bring stability, well-being and development to the people of Vietnam ? During my long years in detention, I have thought deeply, and I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way - we must have true freedom and democracy in Vietnam. This is the only possible solution. We must have pluralism, the right to hold free elections, to chose our own political system, to enjoy democratic freedoms - in brief, the right to shape our own future, and the destiny of our nation. Without democracy and pluralism, we cannot combat poverty and injustice, nor bring true development and progress to our people. Without democracy and pluralism, we cannot guarantee human rights, for human rights cannot be protected without the

safeguards of democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Democracy and pluralism are also vital for the survival of religious movements and for the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, for we shall never be free from religious repression until a democratic process is under way. The UBCV has vast human resources, and we can do so much for our people's development if only we are free.

The Communist leaders are afraid of democracy because they fear it will make them lose power. But what is more important – keeping power or building a free and prosperous Vietnam ? The communist regime justifies its presence in the name of nationalism, independence or economic progress. But in reality, maintaining power is their true concern. Maintaining the power and privileges of a ruling minority of 2 million Party members over the majority of 80 million people. That is the tragedy of Vietnam – in the aim of keeping power at all costs, Hanoi's regime is destroying our nation and our cultural identity.

This is why we Buddhists, and Vietnamese people from all walks of life are calling out urgently for freedom, democracy and human rights. The authorities try to stifle our voice by repression, imprisonment and violence. But they cannot stifle the people's will, for the people's will is the will of God. They cannot stifle it forever. We shall continue our peaceful struggle. We will not stop until we realize our aspirations for democracy in Vietnam.

I am sending you this message to ask your help to bring our voices to the world. Each day, Vietnamese democrats face dangers to keep the spirit of freedom alive. We are not afraid, but we know that we cannot win this battle alone. We need the support of the international community, of democrats around the globe.

Our demands are beautifully simple: We call for the right to existence of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and all other non-recognized religions so that we can contribute to the welfare of our people. We ask for the right to run an independent newspaper in Vietnam, as a forum for democratic debate. We call for the release of all

those who are detained because of their political opinions or religious beliefs.

These aims can be achieved, I am sure of it. This year marks the 30th Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, but also the 30 years of the **UBCV movement for religious freedom, human rights and democracy in Vietnam**. I hope that, with your help and support, it will also mark the first year of a democratic process that will bring lasting peace and freedom to the people of Vietnam.

Venerable **Thich Quang Do**