

## **DPA : Vietnam critical of human rights prize for Buddhist monk**

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Ho Chi Minh City/Oslo, Nov 1, 2006 (dpa) - Communist-run Vietnam on Wednesday dismissed an international human rights prize for a leading monk of a banned Buddhist sect as "completely inappropriate," state media reported.

Thich Quang Do, 77, a pro-democracy activist and deputy patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, said this week he would not travel to Norway to receive the Rafto Prize for human rights because he was afraid he would not be allowed to return if he left Vietnam.

"We are very disappointed that Vietnam has not allowed Thich Quang Do to travel to (west coast town) Bergen to accept the prize," Arne Liljedahl Lynngard, head of the Rafto Foundation board, told Deutsche Presse Agentur (dpa).

Do was in September named winner of the 2006 Rafto Prize "for his personal courage and perseverance through three decades of peaceful opposition against the communist regime in Vietnam."

Four previous winners of the Rafto Prize - Aung San Suu Kyi, José Ramos-Horta, Kim Dae-jung and Shirin Ebadi - later went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

In a letter to the Rafto Foundation, the monk apologized for missing the award ceremony Saturday, saying he would pick up the prize in person only “when the UBCV’s legitimate status has been restored and all its leaders are free.”

Lynngard said it was not the first time a Rafto prize winner had been prevented from accepting the prize, and criticized Vietnam for “blocking alternative voices” like Do who have proposed reforms and freedom of speech.

The award is worth 50,000 kroner (7,600 dollars) and would be accepted on Do’s behalf by Vo Van Ai, Paris-based president of the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, Lynngard said.

The state Vietnam News Agency on Wednesday quoted government spokesman Le Dung as criticizing Do personally and the Rafto Foundation for making the award.

The article accused Rafto Foundation of releasing “slanderous and twisted information about democracy, human rights and religious issues in order to justify its move to award the prize to a person who has violated Vietnamese law (and) provoked disputes and caused divisions among religions.”

Lynngard said the remarks were typical of “regime’s that don’t respect human rights.”

Do’s case was raised when the Norwegian foreign affairs committee visited Vietnam in September and met with Vietnamese officials, but no official reaction has been received to the request that he be allowed to travel to Norway, Lynngard said.

The UBCV is not recognized by Vietnam’s communist government, which insists all religions be governed by the state, a requirement rejected by Do and the sect’s ailing patriarch Thich Huyen Quang.

Both monks have been under police supervision since 2003, when they attempted to hold a nationwide congress of the church’s monks.

The Rafto award was created in 1986 in memory of Professor Thorolf Rafto of the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration in Bergen, who was an outspoken human rights activist.