

AFP : Vietnam monk fears exile if he travels to accept human rights prize

Agence France Presse

HANOI, Oct 31, 2006 (AFP) - A Vietnamese Buddhist monk will not travel to Norway this week to receive the Rafto human rights award because he fears he would be banned from returning to his homeland, his supporters said Tuesday.

Thich Quang Do, a 77-year-old monk who has been under house arrest for more than two decades in the communist country, will be awarded the annual prize Saturday for his work in promoting democracy and freedom of expression.

But Do, the deputy leader of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), asked the Rafto Foundation in a letter to let the UBCV's international spokesman, Vo Van Ai, accept the prize on his behalf.

"It is not impossible that Vietnam will agree to let me travel, giving way to international pressure from your government, or to gain credibility before hosting the APEC Summit in Hanoi this November," Do wrote, according to a transcript released by Ai's International Buddhist Information Bureau.

"But if they let me leave, will they ever let me return? I do not want to be stranded outside my homeland, unable to help my compatriots in their hour of need," said the

letter to foundation president Arne Liljedahl Lynngaard.

The Rafto Foundation said it chose to honour Do, a monk, researcher and author, because he had “devoted his life to the advancement of justice and the Buddhist tradition of non-violence, tolerance and compassion”.

“He receives this prize for his personal courage and perseverance through three decades of peaceful opposition against the communist regime in Vietnam, and as a symbol for the growing democracy movement in the country.”

Vietnam failed to say on Tuesday whether Do would have been allowed to leave the country or to return to Vietnam, but Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Dung said awarding him the Rafto prize was “completely inappropriate.”

“This foundation has released slanderous and twisted information about democracy, human rights and religion in Vietnam,” he said.

Do, he added, “has violated the Vietnamese law, provoked disputes, created divisions among religions, undermined national unity and was tried in conformity with Vietnamese law.”

The Norwegian foundation -- named after Professor Thorolf Rafto, who spent most of his life fighting for human rights -- created the prize in 1986.

Four past recipients of the Rafto -- Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, Jose Ramos-Horta of East Timor, South Korea’s Kim Dae-Jung and Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi -- have gone on to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Vietnam from November 12-19 hosts the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, its largest ever international conference, which will bring to Hanoi the US, Chinese, Russian and other leaders from the 21-nation forum.