Vo Van Ai notes the failure of Vietnam's "renovation" policy and urges Hanoi to recognize the role of civil society and human rights in national development at a Hearing in the European Parliament on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia

PARIS, 2nd September 2008 (Vietnam Committee on Human Rights) – From 25-29 August 2008, **Vo Van Ai**, President of the **Vietnam Committee on Human Rights** and International Spokesman of the **Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam** (UBCV) met European Commission officials and members of the European Parliament in Brussels to press for stronger measures on human rights and democracy in the new **Partnership and Cooperation Agreement** that the EU is currently negotiating with Vietnam. This will replace the 1995 agreement which contains a "human rights clause", but no effective mechanisms to assess human rights improvements – or the lack of them - in Vietnam.

On Monday 25 August, Mr. Vo Van Ai addressed a **Hearing on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia** at the **EP Sub-Committee on Human Rights** hosted by its Chairman, Ms Helene Flautre and attended by numerous MEPs from the different political groups and EU officials. For the first time, the Vietnamese Ambassador to the EU, Mr. Nguyen Manh Dzung and the Cambodian Ambassador were present, and made presentations to the Sub-Committee's hearing.

In his speech, Mr. Ai highlighted the failure of Vietnam's development policy which couples unbridled economic opening with systematic suppression of human rights: *"Today, Vietnam is undergoing a serious economic crisis. This crisis marks the total failure of Vietnam's policy of "doi moi" (renovation) – economic liberalization under authoritarian control. Under this policy, Vietnam treats its people both as source of cheap labour and an enemy of the regime."*

With the rocketing cost of living, *"hunger riots are brewing"* and popular discontent is exploding in every domain, including worker strikes, farmers and peasants' demonstrations against State confiscation of lands ("Victims of Injustice") etc. Mr. Ai accused Vietnam of "waging a war against its own people" by stifling the people's protests instead of seeking real solutions for their problems. He submitted a detailed report to the EP on current violations of social and political rights in Vietnam, including violations of religious freedom against the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Internet restrictions and serious abuses of press freedom, with the recent arrests of journalists or withdrawal of their press cards simply for reporting on cases of official corruption (see **full text of Vo Van Ai's speech** and the **report *"Economic crisis***

and political repression in Vietnam")

Mr Ai. specifically urged the EU to incorporate benchmarks and monitoring mechanisms in the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to ensure that the guarantees of human rights and democratic freedoms enshrined in the Agreement are effectively implemented. These should include stronger measures to protect human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists in Vietnam.

As a basic prerequisite, he stressed, Vietnam should allow independent civil society movements to participate in the process of sustainable development, notably by re-establishing the legal status of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam; release all prisoners of conscience, including the new UBCV Patriarch **Thich Quang Do**, lawyers **Nguyen Van Dai**, **Le Thi Cong Nhan** etc; lift all restrictions on freedom of expression and the press that contravene international law.

On 27-29 August, Vo Van Ai participated in a Symposium on **"Secularism and Religions vis-à-vis fundamentalist violence"** at the European Parliament, organised by the **Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe** (ALDE) and hosted by the Group's leader, **Graham Watson** and prominent MEP **Marco Pannella**. At this Symposium, which gathered together academics and specialists on religions from all over the world, Vo Van Ai spoke on "The role of lay-Buddhists in the movement for democracy in Vietnam" *(see **full text of Vo Van Ai's speech** (in French))*.