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Christian group blocked from giving blankets to orphans; leader tortured

Barnabasaid (07.01.2014) - A group of Christian volunteers were blocked from delivering Christmas gifts to orphans; police ordered them to turn back, and the group's leader was beaten and tortured by a local Communist Party leader.

The church members were trying to give out blankets to orphans and the poor in the mountainous area of Kontum province on 17 December and were halfway to their destination when they were stopped by the police.

The group's leader was hospitalised with multiple internal injuries sustained in the assault by the official.

Statement of Vietnam's clergies concerning ordinance on religion and belief

Democratic Voice of Vietnam (07.10.2013) –

Statement of Vietnam's Clergies Concerning the Ordinance on Religion and Belief of 2004 and the 2012 Decree on Directives and Measures for Implementing the Ordinance on Religion and Belief

Respectfully submitted to:

- Officials in Vietnam's government (Executive Branch and National Assembly)
- Members of the clergies and religious orders, and adherents of the various faiths, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai religion, and others.
- The other citizens of Vietnam
- The governments of all democratic countries

- The UN Human Rights Commission and all international human rights organizations
- News media in Vietnam and the rest of the world.

We, representatives of the clergies of various religions in Vietnam:

1- In consideration of the following: The Communist Party and its members in the government of Vietnam: (a) view religion as the opium that misleads the people and harms society (Karl Marx's teaching), and (b) want to have absolute control over the minds and activities of all the Vietnamese people by forcing everyone to follow the regime's own rules and commands, regardless of higher principles. Therefore the regime has always treated the various religions as its mortal enemies, and intends to destroy them, using both force and administrative measures. The regime always uses both means concurrently, changing its emphasis on each as the situation dictates. The current administrative measures are based on the Ordinance on Religion and Belief (Ordinance No. 21) issued by the National Assembly on 06-18-2004 and Decree on Directives and Measures for Implementing the Ordinance on Religion and Belief (Decree No. 92 updating Decree No. 22) issued by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on 11-09-2012.

2- In consideration of the following: The regime learned from its experience with Mr. Ho Chi Minh's Decree on Religion (Decree No. 234 issued on 06-14-1955), Mr. Pham Van Dong's Decree on Religion (Decree No. 297 issued on 11-11-1997), and Mr. Phan Van Khai's Decree on Religion (Decree No. 22 issued on 03-01-2005). Consequently, its latest ordinance, Ordinance No. 21, and its latest decree, Decree No. 92, are more sophisticated and repressive as they cover all five pillars of any religious organization: legal status, human resources, operation, property, and international activities.

a- Legal Status: the regime has never granted to any legitimate religious organization the same legal status as other (non-religious) organizations (both the latest ordinance and decree fail to mention the legal status of religious organizations). Without this status, religious organizations cannot engage in routine transactions such as opening a bank account or buying and owning property, a major barrier to normal operation. Furthermore, as religious organizations' bank accounts or properties can only be registered under the names of private citizens, they are easier targets of confiscation and other infringement by the regime or individuals associated with the organizations.

The regime allows religious organizations to register for operation (without being recognized as legal entities), but only under draconian restrictions (Articles 5 – 8, Decree 92). The regime has complete control over the religious organizations' right to operate and existence. Currently, the regime has outlawed several religious organizations, including the Unified Buddhist Church, the Original Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, the Orthodox Cao Dai Church, and evangelical churches such as Mennonite or Lutheran. The regime violently represses the banned churches while supporting its own creations, government-controlled religious organizations which are the regime's tools for sabotaging the legitimate churches and misleading its citizens and the international community about the real state of religious freedom in Vietnam.

b- Human Resources (adherents, members of religious orders, clergy). The national identity card lists a citizen's religious belief (no other country requires this from a citizen). This promotes rampant discrimination. No religious adherent has been promoted to senior positions in the government, army, academia, state enterprises, etc. Clearly, the regime treats religious adherents as second class citizens, contradicting Article 29 in the document on proposed constitutional amendments.

Religious Orders – The ordinance requires the administrator of every monastery to register any new members with the local government at the village level; Article 13 of the decree requires that the monastery wait until the appropriate government unit has

approved before it admits a new member. This grants the government the authority to deny individuals seeking to join a monastery and, effectively, the authority to allow any monastery to function.

Clergy – Based on Articles 3-10 of the ordinance, Article 19 of the decree state clearly: “The religious organization that appoints, promotes, elects, or designates these officials must send the registration application [request for approval] to the government’s oversight office”. This effectively allows the regime to have a say in all personnel appointments within the churches, guaranteeing that only persons acceptable to the regime will become members of the clergy.

Before completing their religious training in seminaries, seminarians must complete courses on the history and laws of Vietnam (Article 24 of the ordinance and Article 14-2 of the decree). As these required courses basically cover the history and principles of Communism and the Communist Party; the regime intends to drill its doctrine into seminarians and turn future clergy members into meek collaborators.

c- Operation, Article 17-35 of the ordinance list 14 categories of activities. Articles 5-41 of the decree specify that the organization must register (seek approval) and may not engage in any activity absent official approval. The regime forces the churches to seek approval but reserves for itself the right to deny, subject to its review of the “political attitude” of the individuals being considered and the organization seeking approval. The regime used the words “register” 18 times in the ordinance and 74 times in the decree, “prescribed” 37 times in the ordinance and 69 times in the decree, “prescribed by law” 14 times in the ordinance and 9 times in the decree, and “must state the reason for denial” 18 times in the decree.

The 14 categories of activities can be grouped under two broad headings, 1. Purely religious activities internal to each religious organization, and, 2. A religion’s external activities, i.e., involving social elements. The regime has interfered countless times with those two broad categories of activities from 1975 on. The regime has threatened, harassed, assaulted, detained, or placed under restricted movement status many adherents, clergy members, and members of religious orders who tried to conduct legitimate religious activities, not counting those who merely advocated for genuine human rights and democracy in Vietnam.

Within the previously listed categories of activities that the regime controls, a number of activities are related to human rights and political rights, e.g., the religions are forbidden from having their own publishing capabilities, radio and TV stations, webpages, or time on government radio and TV, even when the public (among whom are adherents of the religions) pays for the government media through taxes. The bottom line is that the churches: (a) may not communicate to the public their religious teachings even when such teachings are intended to improve society; or, (b) establish and operate schools from the elementary level through university level; or, (c) establish and run orphanages, clinics, hospitals, retirement homes, etc.

d- Property, Article 26 of the ordinance states: “Legitimate property belonging to religious organizations is fully protected under the law”. However, the Constitution is premised upon the State owning all land, and in several legal documents, the regime has inserted indefensible clauses concerning property belonging to religious organizations. For example, on 12-31-2008, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung issued Directive No. 1940 in which instructed local governments to “swallow up” church properties that the Communists had already seized in past decades, from 1954 on. The regime took not only real property, but also liquid assets. Moreover, the regime forbids religious organizations from buying or accepting donated real estate in order to prevent any possible expansion of their activities.

e- International Activities, Articles 34-37 of the ordinance and Articles 37-41 of the decree regulate the international activities of the churches, their clergies, and other adherents. Again, the model is "subject to the regime's approval". For example, when the Vatican promotes a Vietnamese priest to bishop, it must have the regime's approval of the proposed individual. At times, the government approved none of the Vatican's nominees. In addition, when clergy members apply to travel abroad for any reason (tourism, religious training, or research), they must meet with public security agents in charge of religious affairs to be coached on what not to do abroad (e.g., may not meet certain individuals or representatives of certain organizations, may not say negative things about the regime, etc.) From the time the regime first allows its citizens to travel abroad, it has exercised ruthless control of any dealing with foreign churches. Clergy members whom the regime blacklists on account of their advocacy for religious freedom and basic human rights always meet with considerable difficulties when applying for a passport, and some have not got any approval. Conversely, if the regime let some of those advocates leave the country, the regime may prevent them from returning to Vietnam. The regime has also denied entry to foreign charitable entities wishing to come to Vietnam and work in a number of localities. The regime has attempted to have its agents infiltrate religious groups among overseas Vietnamese communities in an attempt to turn them against domestic churches that the regime dislike. Particularly, the regime had requested the Vatican to take action against specific individuals or groups who had been a thorn in the regime's side, when such individuals or groups merely tried to seek justice and democracy or religious freedom.

Based on the previously-cited considerations, we, representing the clergies of several religions in Vietnam, affirm the following:

1- The Communist regime has been using Ordinance No. 21 and Decree No. 92 in a manner that goes against the 1992 Constitution, i.e., not to protect the people's religious freedom, but to:

- maintain the mode "subject to official approval" in the regime's dealings with religion (the regime no longer uses this mode vis-à-vis a number of non-religious entities) out of the regime's desire to control all religious life.
- turn religions and their organizations into the regime's instruments for propaganda or silent entities that do not criticize the regime for the harm it has done to Vietnamese society.
- prevent the religions and their organizations from working as true civil society components (independent of the government) when civil society is more urgently needed than ever to turn Vietnam into a democratic country.

2- By their nature, religions are part of civil society and their adherents are citizens with the same rights as the other Vietnamese. The churches and their adherents have human rights and responsibilities that the Constitution guarantees and international covenants proclaim. Therefore the regime must rescind all ordinances, decrees, orders, etc. aimed solely at religion and beliefs because these are intended to repress and discriminate. We believe that we are under no obligation to abide by the unjustified regulations

3- Genuine religious freedom does not exist even when there are impressive places of worship, large religious celebrations, and ease of foreign travel for certain groups of clergy and adherents, as long as the regime represses other religious entities that it considers as having issues with the government. Genuine religious freedom exists only: when a government truly acknowledges the fundamental rights of religious organizations (such rights are not subject to "official approval"), i.e., (a) legal status; (b) true autonomy in their internal affairs; (c) freedom to disseminate their faith within their

places of worship and outside, within their religious communities and outside, through the use of media (books, periodicals, radio, TV, etc.); (d) participating in educational activities at all levels; (e) participating in charitable and social activities; (f) their adherents not being prevented from merit-based promotions to high-level positions.

4- The regime must immediately and unconditionally: (a) release all prisoners of conscience, including those clergy, members of religious orders, and adherents detained for advocating religious freedom or basic human rights; (b) return intangible assets to the churches (e.g., operational independence, freedom from government interference) and tangible property and other assets. This will enable us to contribute to the rebuilding of Vietnamese society and serve our people.

Vietnam, October 4, 2013

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Vietnamese Government and State TV launch fresh attacks on Bishop of Vinh

AsiaNews (16.09.2013) - Vietnamese authorities, with the support of the media, have launched a new, violent attack against the Vinh diocese and Msgr. Paul Nguyen Thai Hop, "guilty" of asking for the release of two parishioners imprisoned for months without motive. In a 10-minute report broadcast last night by state television harsh accusations were made against the prelate, guilty of "lying, breaking the law on purpose and inciting to revolt" against Hanoi. The Catholics are accused of having "artfully fabricated" a legal issue - this is what the authorities say - to transform it into a case of "religious persecution." And the smear campaign was followed by threats against the Catholic community of My Yen and Nghe An, with the promise of "new arrests" if the protests continued.

"In an interview with foreign journalists - claimed the state television broadcast service in Hanoi yesterday - t Bishop Nguyen Thai Hop manipulated the truth, made false accusations against the government of Vietnam in order to transform what is a normal procedure into a case of persecution against the Church." The prelate also apparently "took advantage" of Catholics and their good faith to "foment riots." The report ended with a warning, which sounded more like a threat: "no one is above the law" and there will be "more arrests" if the rebellion continues.

Along with the bishop, the Vietnamese authorities have also targeted the website of the diocese of Vinh. Ngo Ba Hao, vice-president of the Committee for telecommunications

, sent an urgent letter to Msgr. Paul sent an urgent letter to the prelate asking him to shut down the Web site of the diocese or face legal actions as the Web site is operated without the government permission. In fact, the government has never granted any such permission to Church institutions. Due to pastoral needs, dioceses in Vietnam run their websites at the risk of being prosecuted at any time.

The entire Vietnamese Catholic Church, both domestic and in diaspora, has shown full support to the Diocese of Vinh in its responds to recent defamatory attack by government media, defending the good name of its bishop and community and reiterating the baseless accusations of the authorities.

The dispute is really over events linked to the parish in My yen, which is seeking the release of two parishioners who have been in jail since last June without even a formal accusation being made against them. The diocese of Vinh and its bishop intervened in defense of the imprisoned parishioners, requesting the release, and the entire community, legitimizing the protests . The support of the diocesan Catholic leadership has sparked the reaction of the local and central authorities, who have launched a smear campaign against Msgr. Paul Nguyen Thai Hop and threatened to intervene harshly to quell the protest.

For some time now, the Vietnamese government has been involved in a campaign of repression against bloggers, activists and dissidents seeking religious freedom, respect for civil rights, or the end of the one-party state. A [petition has been launched](#) for that purpose. In 2013 alone, Hanoi has arrested more than 40 activists for crimes "against the state", a legal notion human rights groups consider too general and vague. The Catholic Church has also been subjected to constraints and restrictions; its members, victims of persecution. In one case back in January, a Vietnamese court sentenced 14 people, including some Catholics, to prison on charges of attempting to overthrow the government, a ruling criticised forcefully by and human rights activists and movements.

Vietnamese police crush protests against Catholics' imprisonment

Dozens injured, as police use tear gas, batons and police dogs

Around 40 people have been injured in Vietnam during a protest against the 3-month detention of two Catholics on minor charges.

The protest on Sept. 4 in Nghi Phuong, south of Hanoi, was a response to the police refusal to release Nguyen Van Hai, 43, and Ngo Van Khoi, 53, who were arrested May 22 for "disturbing the public order".

Protesters claimed the police had promised the duo's release by Sept. 4, although police later denied this claim. Tear gas, batons and police dogs were used to disperse protests. Around 15 protesters were arrested.

On Sept. 8, the Federation of Vietnamese Catholic Mass Media released a statement condemning the government's role in ordering the harsh police response.

"The laws of Vietnam have become an effective means for the authorities to use whenever they want to suppress their own people," the statement read.

Vietnam is No. 21 on the 2013 [World Watch List](#), an annual ranking of the 50 countries where life as a Christian is most difficult. It is published by Open Doors International, a ministry to Christians living under pressure for their faith.

"In the coming years, it is unlikely that the situation will change substantially in favour of the Christian minority. Authorities have started to place more restrictions on areas that have experienced a more 'lax' approach from the government for years," reports the List.

Of the country's approximate 9.7 million Christians, more than 8 million are Catholics.

Vietnamese authorities assist evicted Christian families with resettlement

CSW (02.07.2013) - Five ethnic minority Christian families from the Central Highlands of Vietnam, who were forcibly evicted from their homes earlier this year, have been able to resettle with the help of Vietnamese authorities, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned.

The families converted to Christianity in early 2012. In January 2013, unknown assailants began to attack the families' property. Over the next three months, the attackers damaged buildings and farmland and destroyed crops and livestock, as well as beating several family members. Sources close to the families say the aim of these attacks was to pressure the families to recant their faith. Finally, the families were forced to escape into the forests.

The Christians sent several petitions to the authorities during the period of the attacks but received no response. After they fled, their case was raised by local and national advocates, including a Protestant Christian leader who was granted meetings with various officials at the local and provincial level. The authorities felt that they could not guarantee the safety of the families if they returned to their own village, but found land for the families in a different village in the same district. They also provided resettlement support, promised compensation, and allowed the Protestant Christian leader to visit them freely.

If this outcome sets a precedent, it could prevent violations against new converts, as would-be perpetrators get the message that freedom of religion or belief is a protected right in Vietnam.

Earlier this month, CSW received reports of two ethnic minority families in the north west who have been summoned for interrogation by police three times since converting to Protestant Christianity in March 2013. On one occasion, a husband and wife were called in for interrogation together and were strongly pressured to leave their religion and recant. When they refused to do so, the police officers beat them. The woman was beaten particularly severely. She reported being hit on the face and head more than ten times. The blows to her face drew blood. At this point, the police released her and sent her home.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We warmly welcome the Vietnamese authorities' efforts to resettle these Christian families and their concern for their safety and well-being. At the same time, we call on the government to take measures to prosecute state and non-state actors who are found to have violated the rights of religious minorities and discriminated against families and individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs. We sincerely hope that the authorities' decision to listen to and

work with the victims in this case will set a precedent for the treatment of victims of religious freedom violations."

Carmelite monastery and Church property targeted, archbishop of Hanoi says

In a letter to government and municipal authorities, the prelate reiterates legitimate Catholic rights. He condemns the demolition of an historic sacred place whose religious function should be preserved. He appeals to the faithful to pray and defend the Church's "rightful rights".

AsiaNews (12.01.2013) - "The land and the Carmelite monastery at 72 Nguyễn Thái Học Street belong to the Archdiocese of Hanoi." The Church "never offered the government any of the 95 buildings that the latter is using across the city," wrote Mgr Peter Nguyen Van Nhon, archbishop of Hanoi, in a letter to Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng and the municipal authorities posted on the archdiocese's website.

On 3 January, the authorities began [tearing down the Carmelite monastery](#) to build a new, [five-storey hospital](#). However, Catholic sources believe there is more than meets the eye, and plans other the hospital might be involved. The monastery with its church has been located at 72 Nguyễn Thái Học Street for more than a century.

After the [recent conviction of young activists](#), the archbishop of Hanoi, Mgr Peter Nguyen Van Nhon, sent an urgent letter to Vietnam's prime minister, his fifth appeal, in order to stop this latest attack against the Catholic community. He also wrote to municipal authorities for the same reason. However, so far his rightful requests have fallen on deaf ears.

In the letter, the prelate reminded the authorities that "the Church's essential mission is to serve the people." In all of its history, the Archdiocese of Hanoi has given "its warm support to the efforts" made to "meet the health needs of the city's residents". Speaking about the city's health care facilities, he said, "Four of Hanoi's ten hospitals use buildings that belong to the Church".

For Mgr Nguyen Van Nhon, that is not all. Using strong words, he "objects" to the "illegal demolition" of the Carmelite monastery for three specific reasons. First, the state has enough land or means to build a hospital or turn existing buildings into one. Secondly, for Catholics, the Carmelite monastery "is a historic and sacred place." Finally, the monastery and its adjacent church must be accessible to the members of Saint Dominic Parish "for the purpose of worship".

In ending his letter, the prelate called on the faithful "to come together in prayer" to defend the "rightful rights of the Church".

Concerns new decree restricts religious freedom in Vietnam

Christian Today (02.01.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide is concerned that a new decree in Vietnam will seriously curtail religious freedom.

It describes Decree 92 as "vague" and "restrictive".

The decree was issued in November and came into force on 1 January.

It sets out the conditions for registration of religious activities and practitioners, and places new conditions on "foreigners" organising religious conferences and events.

Nguyen Hung of AsiaNews believes the decree follows the Chinese model of control of religions.

Nguyen's report cites Catholic priests and parishioners who believe the decree is a sign that the government is "looking for a way to control and restrict the freedom of religion".

The International Buddhist Information Bureau fears that the decree will increase state control of religions.

The 84-year-old leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thich Quang Do, who is under house arrest, also raised concerns in an interview with Radio Free Asia, saying that the new decree will "seriously curtail religious freedom" in Vietnam.

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston, said: "Whilst welcoming the Vietnamese government's recognition of the need for new guidance on the implementation of laws relating to religion in Vietnam, CSW is deeply concerned about the restrictive nature of Decree 92."

He said the decree appeared to restrict religious activities in a manner that was inconsistent with Vietnam's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly Article 18 which relates to freedom of religion or belief.

Mr Johnston added: "CSW urges the Government of Vietnam to ensure that the right to freedom of religion or belief is fully guaranteed by law."
