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Five months of attacks on Mennonite Church in Vietnam prompt SOS

Morning Star News (14.11.2014) <http://morningstarnews.org/2014/11/five-months-of-attacks-on-mennonite-church-in-vietnam-prompt-sos/> - Police in Vietnam on Wednesday (Nov. 12) employed thugs wielding hammers and metal cutters to ransack a church center and drag away nine Christians, who were then charged with not having proper papers - documents officials had confiscated from them in previous raids.

The thugs - accompanied this time, inexplicably, by provocatively attired prostitutes - arrived just before midnight, screaming and intimidating Christians staying at the center in Ben Cat, Binh Duong Province north of Ho Chi Minh City. An older woman of the congregation asked police if these women were their usual allies in carrying out their duties, leaders of the Mennonite church center said.

Police stood by filming the attack.

Two Mennonite pastors and the son of pastor Nguyen Hong Quang were among those arrested, threatened and interrogated for two hours before being released and charged with not having their ID cards and temporary residence papers. The documents had been confiscated during earlier raids and not returned, church leaders said.

Not having these papers leaves them subject to further police harassment and difficulties with employment and school studies. The nine Christians have been summoned to return for further interrogation.

The church completed repairs of a broken fence, gate and doors at the center on that day following attacks on Sunday and Monday (Nov. 9 and 10).

The unregistered Mennonite Church led by Pastor Quang has been regularly attacked by police and gangs since [June](#).

At times authorities have also cut off the center's water and electricity. Another Mennonite church whose leadership has avoided criticism of the Vietnam's human rights record is registered and has few problems.

Having distributed detailed reports on many of the attacks on the Mennonite church, Pastor Quang and other church leaders issued an emergency, worldwide appeal following Wednesday night's attack.

The appeal asserts that a steady stream of attacks and injustices over five months has built a strong sense of helpless indignation among the Christians. Attacks usually come on weekends but sometimes continue for days. In addition, since Oct. 25 roads approaching the Mennonite center have been blocked and Christians coming for worship harassed. One Christian who had his nose broken and bloodied on Oct. 25 required emergency medical attention.

"They send gangs and thugs, strangers, masked people, and police of various units to harass and arrest us during the day and the night, when we worship, when we pray, when we have Bible study, when we have children's classes, when we eat together, when we have school ceremonies," states the report, signed by Quang and four others identified only as Hung, Hong, Thach and Du. "They use bricks and stones to damage our building, and they pelt us with rotten eggs."

All members of the church are subject to attack - pastors, elders and lay Christians - not only at the church center but also at their homes or workplaces, the report notes, adding that officials stole 8.5 million dong (US\$394) from one Christian.

"They employ police of the 113 unit, rapid response police, security police in plain clothes, gangs and thugs, all taking turns to harass and threaten us," the report states. "Thirty-four people have been injured, some to the point they had to be taken to hospital emergency. Pastor Quang was attacked in the church sanctuary in June by a gang with police and officials looking on, not lifting a finger to intervene."

Those most culpable are Binh Duong Police Chief Lt.-Gen. Vo Thanh Duc and Chairman of the Binh Duong Provincial Peoples' Committee Le Thanh Cung, the appeal states.

"With this emergency appeal, we strongly condemn the police of Binh Duong Province for their brazen oppression," it states. "We appeal to all Vietnamese people, at home and abroad, all international human rights organizations, news organizations here and abroad, to help spread this news to the human rights community, and to all governments concerned about human rights, and to U.N. organizations concerned with protecting human rights, to help end the evil being perpetrated by the Binh Duong police and government officials."

The church leaders state that they hope the relevant Vietnamese government agencies will conduct an independent investigation into the violations of law, the threats to life and property and infringements of basic human rights.

"We hope that members of our faith community everywhere will pray for our Mennonite church in Binh Duong at this time," they conclude.

Pastor Quang has served several stints in prison for his human rights and religious liberty activism. Since his last release in 2005, he has concentrated on church work and says he has eschewed activism, but officials still harass him.

The appeal notes that the recent round of trouble for the Mennonites started just before the visit in July of U.N. Special Rapporteur on Religion and Belief Heiner Bielefeldt. Bielefeldt cut short his visit in protest when he found those he was interviewing about religious freedom were being harassed by officials both before and after his visits with them. The rapporteur's report was highly critical of the Vietnamese government policies and practices regarding religion.

Christians in Vietnam believe the extent and intensity of persecution of the Mennonite group show the extreme concern and even hatred that authorities have for anyone with a reputation for bold truth-speaking.

Pastor Quang discovered that authorities were circulating a document stating he was an active member of an opposition, and therefore illegal, political party. Some speculate that he was accused of using China's oil rig incursion into Vietnam's territorial waters last spring to criticize the Vietnamese government of weakness. The Mennonite leader denies these accusations.

Knowledgeable sources say that if he were guilty of any of these infractions, he would have been arrested by now.

For his part, Pastor Quang said, "It's quite clear that Vietnamese Communists are intent on eradicating our Mennonite church."

In a related development, at press time Morning Star News learned that arrested ethnic minority pastor Dinh Nhat Minh Khao was under interrogation, and that he was under pressure to open his email and Facebook accounts and print them out as a means of "confession."

U.N. religion expert concerned over 'interrupted' Vietnam visit

Reuters (01.08.2014) - A U.N. expert expressed worry on Thursday over "serious violations" of religious freedom in Vietnam following a fact-finding mission he said was interrupted by surveillance, harassment and intimidation.

Heiner Bielefeldt, U.N. Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, said parts of his trip were hampered by interference by unidentified agents, with people he met followed or questioned and others warned or blocked from seeing him.

Religion remains under state supervision in mainly Buddhist Vietnam, which has long been accused of suppressing freedom of worship by groups and individuals with faiths not registered or recognized by the communist country's rulers.

Bielefeldt said he had seen positive developments in terms of coexistence of faiths and "cautiously widened" space to practice religions, but that was marred by breaches of agreements to guarantee unsupervised access without threats or punishment to those he met.

"I received credible information that some individuals whom I wanted to meet with had been either under heavy surveillance, warned, intimidated, harassed or prevented from traveling by police," he told a news conference.

"I was closely monitored of my whereabouts ... while the privacy and confidentiality of some meetings could have been compromised."

The United States has called on Vietnam to allow greater religious freedom among a series of demands for it to improve its human rights record as Washington tries to build a case for deeper trade and military ties with its former enemy.

Vietnam was removed in 2006 from a U.S. blacklist of countries "of particular concern" over curbs on faiths and beliefs, but a U.S. religious freedom watchdog recently renewed its call for it to be put back on.

The United States wants to capitalize on Vietnam's emerging market potential and court a new ally in Southeast Asia to counter the growing but contentious influence of its communist neighbor, China. Ties between China and Vietnam have recently deteriorated over a territorial dispute in the South China Sea.

Bielefeldt said he was disappointed by Vietnamese officials' views on unregistered faiths and beliefs, which he described as a "very negative and very dismissive attitude".

He said he had heard allegations during the visit of harassment, house arrest, violence, pressure to renounce faiths and destruction or vandalism of places of worship. Though unable to verify them, he said he could determine abuses took place "beyond reasonable doubt".

Bielefeldt was, however, encouraged by government officials' willingness to amend legislation and improve implementation of religion policies, which he described as "extremely limited and extremely unclear", meaning there was scope for abuses by the state as offences were not clearly defined.

Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh said Bielefeldt's reports of interference were a "misunderstanding".

"According to resolution number 5/2 of the Human Rights Council, the host country is responsible for security and absolute safety for the special rapporteur," Binh told a news conference.

Eric P. Schwartz, a top member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, recommended during a congressional hearing in March that Vietnam be put back on the U.S. blacklist. He said interference during the U.N. expert's visit was not in Vietnam's broader strategic interests.

The violations "only underscore the importance of U.S. efforts to promote human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam," Schwartz said in an email to Reuters.

"It is important that the Vietnamese government understand that these issues will have an impact on the evolving relationship with the United States, as they should."

UN expert finds serious violations on visit interrupted by witness intimidation

CSW (31.07.2014) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today condemns the surveillance and intimidation of witnesses by police during the visit to Vietnam of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Professor Heiner Bielefeldt. CSW also highlights the Special Rapporteur's subsequent assertion that "serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Vietnam".

During his official visit, Professor Bielefeldt met with various government officials and local authorities, as well as representatives of religious or belief communities.

However, scheduled visits to An Giang, Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces were interrupted when some individuals Professor Bielefeldt planned to meet were "intimidated, harassed or prevented from travelling by the police". All three provinces have witnessed religious freedom violations in recent years, including violent attacks against Catholics and Protestants in Kon Tum in 2012 and 2013.

At the conclusion of his visit today in Hanoi, the Special Rapporteur made reference to the “generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practising religion outside of the established channels”, the lack of specificity around the terms “majority interests” and “social order” and broad limitation clauses concerning human rights, as well as “vague formulations within the Penal Code [...] concerning the ‘abuse’ of democratic freedoms”, and the “absence of sufficiently efficient and accessible legal recourse”.

The Special Rapporteur has concluded that despite some positive developments at the central level, and an increased space for religious practices in recent years, “serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Vietnam”. Professor Bielefeldt will present a report containing his conclusions and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council in 2015.

CSW’s Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said: “Though concerning, we welcome the UN Special Rapporteur’s observations on the obstacles to freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam, in particular the restrictions on independent or unregistered religious groups, including some Protestant communities. At the same time, we are distressed by reports of harassment and intimidation of those meeting with the Special Rapporteur. We share the concerns of the Special Rapporteur for these individuals, and call on the Vietnamese government to ensure that none of the persons involved in the visit will be threatened, harassed, arrested or otherwise penalised following the Special Rapporteur’s departure from Vietnam.”

Security agents assault UBCV monk Thich Chon Tam and pursue crack-down on UBCV

IBIB (14.01.2014) – At 8:00am this morning (Vietnam time), Venerable **Thich Chon Tam** of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) was intercepted and assaulted by plain-clothed Security agents as he was riding his motorbike in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). As he stopped at a red traffic light near Nguyen Van Cu bridge, a car pulled up in front of him (number plate 55 P8 4324). Another car then rammed into his motorbike from behind. Plain-clothed security agents got out and began to assault him. Thich Chon Tam cried out loud and appealed for help from passers-by. As a crowd began to gather, a third car suddenly pulled up and a man - ostensibly their chief – told the agents to move on: “*that’s enough for now*”, he said.

Thich Chon Tam, who is the newly-appointed Secretary-general of the UBCV’s Institute of the Sangha and assistant to the Patriarch Thich Quang Do, has been the target of close Police surveillance and harassments for several days. On 8 January, he was expelled from Hue by Security Police and forced to return to Saigon after he attempted to attend a UBCV commemoration service. Since then, Police keep permanent watch on the Tu Hieu Pagoda in Saigon where he is in temporary residence, and follow him wherever he goes. In an urgent communication to the International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB) this morning, Thich Chon Tam wrote: “*How can Vietnam host UN International Vesak Day when Police beat and intimidate Buddhist monks in broad daylight on the streets of Saigon?*”

Crack-down on the UBCV

Police harassment of Thich Chon Tam is not an isolated incident. It is part of an on-going crack-down on members of the new UBCV executive announced by Thich Quang Do in early January 2014. Repression has been particularly harsh in Hue, where Police

prevented the new UBCV Deputy leader **Thich Nhu Dat** from organizing a Memorial Day ceremony on 10 January at Long Quang Pagoda, the UBCV's new secretariat.

Thich Nhu Dat told IBIB that Police had systematically intercepted and threatened 300 UBCV monks, nuns and youth leaders from all over southern and central Vietnam who were invited to attend the ceremony. Police controls were set up at the airport and train station, as well as numerous blockades on the roads from Highway No. 1 to the Pagoda's entrance. Over 100 Police surrounded Long Quang Pagoda, and several leaders of the UBCV youth movement were threatened, harassed and placed under house arrest (see below).

Thich Nhu Dat said that he and his monks went ahead with the ceremony despite the ban, and were determined not to give in to Police intimidation. *"They told us we could not celebrate Memorial Day because (a) The UBCV is banned (b) all who follow the UBCV are breaking the law, and (c) Thich Nhu Dat is a reactionary monk". The truth is that the UBCV cares about the sufferings of the Vietnamese people. We call for human rights, not only for the Buddhists but for 90 million Vietnamese. I may be "reactionary" in the eyes of the Police, but that won't stop me supporting the UBCV's peaceful movement for religious freedom and human rights led by our Patriarch Thich Quang Do".*

"With just one signature we can throw you in jail !"

The leader of the UBCV Buddhist Youth Movement and newly-appointed Secretary-general of the UBCV's Executive Institute **Lê Cong Cau** was arrested in this crack-down on 1 January 2014 and remains under house arrest today. He is forbidden to go outside or receive visits. Police are stationed outside his door and he is subjected to "working sessions" (interrogations) twice each day. Police threaten to imprison him if he does not step down from his post in the UBCV. At the end of each working session, the Security Police warn: *"With just one signature we can throw you in jail"*.

So far, 23 Buddhist Youth Movement leaders have been arrested in this crack-down and are currently under house arrest in Hue. They are: *Ho Nguyen Minh, Y, Ho Van Nich, Hoang Nhu Dao, Hoang Tanh, Hoang Thi Hong Phuong, Lê Cong Cau, Lê Nhat Tinh, Lê Van Thanh, Ngo Duc Tien, Nguyen Chien, Nguyen Dinh Mong, Nguyen Duc Khoa, Nguyen Sac, Nguyen Tat Truc, Nguyen Thi Huong, Nguyen Van De, Truong Dien Hieu, Truong Minh Dung, Truong Trong Thao, Van Dinh An, Van Dinh Tat, Van Thi Hieu, Van Tien Nhi.*

UBCV nun Thich Nu Dong Hieu is beaten by Police in Danang

At 4:00am on 10 January 2014, as Venerable **Thich Thanh Quang** and a young nun, **Thich Nu Dong Hieu** from the Giac Minh Pagoda in Danang called a car to take them to Hue for the Memorial Day service, Security Police surrounded the Pagoda and pushed them back inside. At 7:00am, a crowd of Security Police broke into the Pagoda again, shouting insults and rudely. When Thich Thanh Quang ordered them to leave the premises, a burly Security officer violently attacked Thich Nu Dong Hieu, slapping her repeatedly in the face until she fainted.

The **International Buddhist Information Bureau** deplores Police harassment of peaceful Buddhist followers. Vietnam is a state party to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and has a binding obligation to respect religious freedom. IBIB calls on the international community to call for specific improvements in freedom of religion or belief with the Vietnamese government at its upcoming Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council next month, notably the re-establishment of the UBCV's legitimate status, the release of UBCV leader Thich Quang Do and all others detained for the peaceful exercise of their religious beliefs.-

Police harass and intercept UBCV monks and lay-followers to prevent celebrations of Buddhism's Memorial Day in Hue

IBIB (08.01.2014) – Buddhists in the central city of Hue inform the **International Buddhist Information Bureau** (IBIB) that Police and security forces are intercepting, harassing and intimidating monks, nuns and lay-followers of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) to prevent them from organizing a Memorial Day commemoration at the **Long Quang Pagoda** in Hue on 10 January 2014. Since this morning (Vietnam time), over 100 Security Police have surrounded Long Quang Pagoda, intercepting all those who attempt to enter or leave. Since 6 pm (Vietnam Time), the internet at Long Quang Pagoda has been cut.

Memorial Day is one of the most important events in the Buddhist calendar in Vietnam. It is held to honour and commemorate the founding masters of Vietnamese Buddhism and all those who have contributed to its development over the past 2,000 years. It was to be held at Long Quang Pagoda because this is the new Secretariat of the UBCV's Executive Institute *Viện Hóa Đạo*, and Venerable **Thich Nhu Dat**, the Pagoda's Superior monk, is *Viện Hóa Đạo*'s new head. He replaces Thich Vien Dinh of Giac Hoa Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City who was dismissed from his post in December 2013.

On Tuesday (7 January), Venerable **Thich Thanh Quang**, Deputy Head of *Viện Hóa Đạo* was summoned for interrogations by Security Police in Danang and forbidden to attend the commemorations in Hue. When he protested, they stepped up Police surveillance around his Pagoda (the Giac Minh Pagoda in Danang, also the head office of the Buddhist Youth Movement, has been under tight Police surveillance for the past three years).

Venerable **Thich Chon Tam**, Secretary General of the UBCV Institute of the Sangha, travelled from the southern province of An Giang to assist with Memorial Day preparations. Since yesterday morning, local Security Police have subjected him to "working sessions" (interrogations) and threaten to send him back to An Giang.

Venerable **Thich Nguyen Ly**, UBCV Treasurer and Charity Commissioner was intercepted by Police as he set off from Ho Chi Minh City with a delegation of UBCV monks and followers from the Tu Hieu Meditation Centre yesterday. They were forced to turn back, and the centre is now surrounded by Security forces.

Monks and nuns from 18 UBCV Provincial Committees all over southern and central Vietnam have been similarly intercepted and placed under surveillance in their pagodas.

Members of the **Buddhist Youth Movement** (BYM) are also the target of severe Police harassments. **Nguyen Tat Truc**, BYM Deputy leader and head of the BYM section in Hue was arrested and detained for questioning on 6 and 7 January. Police accused him of participating in an "illegal organization" (the UBCV) and of "violating the law" by signing letters on behalf of the BYM. Security Police ordered him to resign from the UBCV's Executive Institute and prohibited him from going outside Thuy Phuong district. He is explicitly forbidden to attend Memorial Day at Long Quang Pagoda, and has been placed under close Police surveillance. Nguyen Tat Truc's house arrest has seriously impacted his family's economic situation, since he is no longer able to take his wife to work in Hue, where they rely on her earnings in the period before Tet (Lunar New year) to ensure their income.

Hoang Nhu Dao, Deputy head of the BYM in Hue was interrogated by Police at his home on Tuesday morning and questioned again at the Police station in the afternoon. He has also been accused of "*illegal activities*" and Police are now posted outside his home, frightening his young children.

Many members of the Buddhist Youth Movement were also intercepted and prevented from attending the traditional Memorial ceremony for founders of the BYM in Vietnam on 7 January at the Phuoc Thanh Pagoda in Hue. Whereas this annual event usually draws hundreds of participants, only 70 BYM leaders managed to circumvent Police controls. Key members of the BYM currently subjected to harassments, surveillance and Police "working sessions" include: **Hoang Nhu Dao** (in Phuong Dien district); Ms. **Hoang Thi Hong Phuong, Van Dinh Tat** and **Nguyen Sac** (in Quang Dien district); **Ngo Duc Tien** and **Van Tien Nhi** (in Phu vang District); **Truong Dien Hieu** (Huong Tra district); **Nguyen Tat Truc** and **Nguyen Dinh Mong** (Huong Thuy district). The BYM reports that it has been unable to contact many other members, and fears for their security.

Lê Công Câu, national BYM leader and Secretary General of the UBCV's Executive Institute *Viện Hóa Đạo*, who was arrested on 1 January 2014 remains under house arrest without charge at his home in Hue without any formal justification or charge, and is obliged to attend frequent Police interrogations.

The **International Buddhist Information Bureau** (IBIB) strongly condemns this new crack-down on the UBCV and its educational youth movement, the BYM. Although Police claim it is an "*illegal organization*", the UBCV has never been formally banned by the communist authorities. Its members are therefore legitimately entitled to pursue peaceful religious activities as guaranteed by the Vietnamese Constitution. IBIB calls on the international community to press Vietnam to uphold its binding obligations as a state party to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in particular, to raise these cases with Vietnam during its upcoming **Universal Periodic Review** at the **United Nations Human Rights Council on 5 February 2014**.
