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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Vietnam

 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
 September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, but, in practice, the government regulated and in some cases restricted religious freedom. The government generally respected the religious freedom of most registered religious groups; however, some registered and unregistered groups reported abuses.

There were continued reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Despite areas of progress, significant problems remained, especially at the provincial and village levels. These included slow – or no – approval of registration for some groups, including the unrecognized Hoa Hao, Buddhist faith, and Protestant groups in the North and Northwest highlands. There were reports of harsh treatment of detainees after a protest over the closing of a cemetery in Con Dau parish. Some Christian groups also reported harassment when they tried to hold Christmas services. The government also showed signs of progress; it facilitated the construction of hundreds of new places of worship, granted national registration to two new religions, registered new congregations, permitted the expansion of charitable activities, and allowed large-scale worship services with more than 100,000 participants.

There were a few instances of societal violence based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period. Many Catholics and Protestants reported that Christians experienced unofficial discrimination when applying for government positions.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City maintained regular dialogue with senior and working-level government officials to advocate for greater religious freedom. U.S. officials met and communicated regularly with religious leaders, including religious activists under government scrutiny. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other senior State Department officials raised religious freedom concerns with government officials and called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Religious freedom also was a central topic in the 2010 U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Hanoi.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 127,000 square miles and a population of 89.6 million. Most estimates suggest more than half of the population is at least nominally Buddhist. The Roman Catholic Church constitutes 7 percent. Several Cao Dai organizations constitute 2.5 to 4 percent, the primary Hoa Hao organization 1.5 to 3 percent, Protestants 1 to 2 percent, and Muslims less than 0.1 percent of the population. Most other citizens consider themselves nonreligious, although some practice traditional beliefs such as animism and veneration of ancestors and national heroes.

The government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) estimates there are 10 million (11 percent of the population) Mahayana Buddhists, most of whom are members of the ethnic Kinh community (the country's majority group, also referred to as Viet). In Ho Chi Minh City alone, there are more than 1,000 active Buddhist pagodas. A Khmer ethnic minority in the south,

numbering more than one million, practices Theravada Buddhism and has more than 570 pagodas.

Although government statistics indicate there are 6.28 million Catholics, other estimates place the number at eight million. Catholicism has revived in recent years with newly rebuilt or renovated churches and a growing number of persons who want to be religious workers. Three archbishops, 44 bishops, and nearly 4,000 priests oversaw 26 dioceses. There are more than 10,000 places of worship including six seminaries and two clergy training centers. The number preparing for the priesthood has grown by more than 50 percent over the past five years and now totals 1,500, according to the Vatican.

Government statistics put the number of Cao Dai, a syncretic religion combining elements of many faiths, at 2.3 million, although Cao Dai officials claim approximately 3.9 million adherents. According to the government, there are 1.3 million Hoa Hao followers; affiliated expatriate groups estimate as many as three million adherents. A small number of Hoa Hao belong to other sects that oppose the officially sanctioned Hoa Hao Administrative Committee, such as the Pure Hoa Hao Church and the Traditional Hoa Hao Church.

The two largest officially recognized Protestant churches are the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and the smaller Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN). The Vietnam Baptist Convention (Grace Southern Baptist), United World Mission Church, Vietnam Mennonite Church, Vietnam Presbyterian Church, Vietnam Baptist Society (Southern Baptist), Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Vietnam Christian Fellowship also are officially recognized. Other Protestant denominations also are present, including the Assemblies of God (registered nationally) as well as others registered locally but not registered on the national level. Estimates of the number of Protestants ranged from government figures of one million to claims by churches of more than two million.

The small Muslim population numbers 70,000 to 80,000, and mosques are located in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, western An Giang Province, and provinces in the southern coastal area. The government estimates there are nearly 73,000 Muslims. Approximately 40 percent of Muslims are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam.

There are several smaller religious communities, the largest of which is the Hindu community. Approximately 50,000 ethnic Cham in the south-central coastal area practice a devotional form of Hinduism. There are an estimated 7,200 Bahais, largely concentrated in the south. There are approximately 1,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) throughout the country, with two locally recognized congregations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The Jehovah's Witnesses have 55 active congregations in 18 provinces with 3,000 members. There is one Jewish temple in Ho Chi Minh City serving approximately 150 Jews, mainly foreign residents, living in the city.

At least 14 million citizens, constituting 17 percent or more of the population, reportedly do not practice any organized religion. The government does not categorize those whose activities are limited to visiting pagodas on ceremonial holidays as practicing Buddhists. No statistics were available on the level of participation in formal religious services, but it was generally acknowledged that this number has continued to increase since 2000.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14 percent of the population. Based on adherents' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including minority groups in the Northwest Highlands (H'mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and M'ngong, among others). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom but, in practice, the government regulated and in some cases restricted religious freedom. The constitution, legal code, and a 2003 Communist Party Central Committee resolution on religion provide for freedom of belief and worship as well as nonbelief; however, restrictions exist in policy and practice. The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief serves as the primary document governing religious practice. It reiterates citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion, but warns that the "abuse" of freedom of belief or religion "to undermine the country's peace, independence, and unity" is illegal, and religious activities must be suspended if they "negatively affect the cultural traditions of the nation."

There are 34 recognized religious organizations affiliated with 11 recognized religions (Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, the Four Gratuities, Threefold Enlightened Truth Path, Threefold Southern Tradition, and the Bahai Community). The government also has granted national registration to two religious organizations: one distinct religious group, the Mysterious Fragrance from Precious Mountains, and one Protestant denomination, the Assemblies of God.

In July the Vietnam Christian Fellowship Church, with more than 1,200 congregations and 200,000 members, and the Four Debts of Gratitude Church received national recognition. The Assemblies of God Church held its first national congress in October.

According to statistics from the CRA, in 2009 more than 984 religious establishments were renovated or newly constructed. Additionally nearly 300 new Protestant prayer chapels were built on land granted by authorities.

Unregistered religious groups can be vulnerable to coercive and punitive action by national and local authorities. In some parts of the country, local authorities tacitly approved of the activities of unregistered groups and did not interfere with them. In other areas local officials punished the same activities. Some unregistered groups were moving towards national registration and recognition, but others chose not to seek registration for various reasons. Groups that did not seek to register nationally tended to draw additional government scrutiny.

The government stated that they continued to monitor the activities of certain religious groups because of their political activism. The government invoked national security and solidarity provisions in the constitution to override laws and regulations providing for religious freedom, which impeded some religious gatherings and attempts by affected religious followers to spread beliefs to certain ethnic groups in sensitive border regions and in the central highlands.

The penal code, as amended in 1997, establishes penalties for vaguely defined offenses such as "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and nonbelievers." The government continued to limit the organized activities of independent religious groups and of individuals who were regarded as a threat to Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) authority.

Under the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, the government has control and oversight of religious organizations, which must be officially recognized or registered. "Appropriate" lower-level authorities must approve leadership, activities, and the establishment of seminaries or religious classes. The appointment of priests or other religious officials requires authorities' approval only when a higher-level foreign religious organization, such as the Vatican, is involved. The ordinance explicitly bans forced renunciations of faith. The ordinance requires religious organizations to inform appropriate authorities of their annual activities or the investiture and transfer of clerics, and it no longer requires official government approval. Furthermore, the ordinance encourages religious groups to carry out charitable activities in health care and education, which were limited in the past.

Implementing Decree 22, also issued in 2005, provides further guidance on the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. It delineates specific procedures by which an unrecognized religious organization may register its places of worship, clerics, and activities to operate openly and apply for official recognition. The decree specifies that a religious organization must have 20 years of "stable religious operation" in the country to be recognized by the government and states that past operation in the country can be counted toward this requirement.

The decree also clarifies the procedures for religious organizations and individual congregations seeking official recognition. To obtain official recognition, a denomination must receive national-level registration, which according to the legal framework involves several legal stages. First the religious organization must apply for and receive registration in each local administrative area in which it operates. Registration requires a religious organization to file information with relevant authorities about its structure, leadership, and activities. After maintaining national registration for one year, the eligible religious group may apply for full legal recognition after hosting a national convention where it elects leaders. The decree further specifies that appropriate authorities must provide a written response to requests for official recognition within 30, 45, 60, or 90 days, depending on the scope of the request. In the case of a refusal, a specific reason must be included in the written response, although this requirement also does not appear to be consistently followed. There is no specific mechanism for appeal in the ordinance, nor are the reasons for denying a request restricted in any way.

Finally Decree 22 states, "Acts to force citizens to follow a religion or renounce their faith...are not allowed." The Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism contained a similarly worded statement. Although government officials stated forced conversions or renunciation of faith had always been illegal, these were the first legal documents to state so explicitly.

The decree and the Law on Land stipulate that religious organizations are not permitted to purchase land as legal entities, and provincial people's committees must grant the land and approve the construction of new religious facilities. Typically the land is purchased by a member of a congregation and then deeded to the province, followed by the granting of the land to the congregation. The renovation or upgrade of religious facilities also requires notification to authorities, although not necessarily requiring a permit, depending on the extent of the renovation. The decree stipulates that authorities must respond to a construction permit application within 20 days.

The national-level CRA is charged with disseminating information about the legal framework on religion to authorities at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels and assuring uniform compliance. Implementation of the legal framework on religion at lower levels of the government continued to be mixed. During the reporting period, national and provincial

authorities held a number of training courses for lower-level officials about the new laws to assure their understanding and compliance with the ordinance.

Adherence to a religious faith generally does not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernment civil, economic, and secular life, although unofficial policies of the CPV and military prevent advancement by religious adherents. Practitioners of various religious groups served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Some religious organizations, such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), as well as clergy and religious followers, are members of the CPV-affiliated mass political and social organization, the Vietnam Fatherland Front. High-ranking government officials make a special point to send greetings and visit churches over Christmas and Easter as well as attend Vesak day (a commemoration of the birth of Buddha) activities.

The government officially recognizes the Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Bahai, Muslim, Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, Threefold Southern Tradition, and Threefold Enlightened Truth Path faiths as religious organizations. Individual denominations within these recognized groups must also be registered. Some Buddhist, Protestant, and Hoa Hao sects do not participate in government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations.

The government requires all religious publishing to be done by the Religious Publishing House, which is part of the State Publishing House's Office of Religious Affairs, or by other government-approved publishing houses after the government first approves the proposed items. However, other publishing houses have been able to print and distribute religion-related materials, and all bookstores are free to sell religious materials. The Bible is printed in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'ngong, and English. The government has not approved printing in H'mong.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools; however, it permitted clergy to teach at universities in subjects in which they are qualified. Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Buddhist groups are allowed to provide religious education to adherents in their facilities. Religious groups are not permitted to operate independent schools beyond preschool and kindergarten. Atheism is not officially taught in public schools.

Religious affiliation is indicated on citizens' national identification cards and in "family books," which are household identification documents. Discrimination against individuals with a listed religious preference was not reported. In practice many persons who consider themselves religious choose not to indicate a religious affiliation on their identification cards, and government statistics include them as nonreligious. Although it is possible to change the classification of religious affiliation on national identification cards, most converts find the procedures overly cumbersome and are typically unable to change their classification.

Prisoners did not have the right to manifest their religious beliefs or practices in public.

The officially sanctioned VBS incorporates Mahayana, Theravada, and Bhikshu Buddhism. All Buddhist groups within the VBS are proportionally represented throughout the leadership structure and organization. In practice Theravada monks meet separately to determine issues such as doctrine, education, and other community needs to raise within the VBS. There are several recently recognized religious organizations that have Buddhist influences but are separate and distinct from the VBS. Of these, the Pure-Land Buddhist Home Practice faith has the largest membership with more than 1.3 million followers.

The country's history and its recent rapid economic development complicated land issues. Many individuals and nearly every religious denomination in the country prior to 1975 have outstanding land claims resulting from the nationalization of private property following the war. Some claims were further complicated by the fact that land once home to Buddhist pagodas was given to the Catholic Church during the French colonial period. While the government and the Catholic Church agreed to the return of four properties in 2009, the status of many other properties remained unresolved. The government returned a small number of previously confiscated properties to recognized Protestant organizations, but other disputes continued. The SECV continued to seek restitution for more than 250 properties; other denominations active in the South before 1975 also had claims. Provincial authorities returned a limited number of properties confiscated from religious organizations after 1975 and remained in protracted discussions on others. Many properties seized were schools and hospitals later incorporated into the state system.

Persons who belong to unofficial religious groups were not permitted to speak publicly about their beliefs, but some conducted religious training and services without harassment. Members of religious organizations that are not registered nationally may speak about their beliefs and may persuade others to adopt their religions, but only in locally registered places of worship. The government controlled all forms of public assembly; however, several large religious gatherings were allowed.

The government does not observe any religious holidays as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The constitutional right to freedom of belief and religion continued to be subject to uneven interpretation and protection. Government practices and bureaucratic impediments restricted religious freedom.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The government generally allowed increasing numbers of individuals and groups to express their religious beliefs. Most religious groups reported their ability to meet openly for religious worship improved. However, the government requires the registration of all activities by religious groups and uses this requirement to restrict and discourage participation in certain unrecognized religious groups actively, including the UBCV and some Protestant and Hoa Hao groups.

Because of the lack of due process and inconsistent oversight, religious activities can be subject to the discretion of local officials. In some cases local officials reportedly told religious leaders that national laws did not apply to their jurisdictions. In certain cases recognized and unrecognized Protestant groups were able to overcome local harassment or to overturn negative local decisions after they appealed to higher-level authorities.

Several hundred ECVN congregations continued to await action on their applications to register. Reasons cited for delays in the process or rejection of applications included bureaucratic impediments such as not following correct procedures in completing forms or providing incomplete information. Local authorities also cited vague security concerns and stated either that their political authority could be threatened or that confrontations could occur between traditional believers and recently converted Christians. During the year local authorities registered approximately 30 ECVN congregations.

The government continued to restrict the movement of some UBCV leaders, although the UBCV operated many pagodas without restriction. As in previous reporting periods, UBCV leaders reported they were urged to restrict their movements although they were able to receive visits from foreign diplomats, visit other UBCV members, and maintain contact with associates overseas; however, these activities were closely scrutinized. While the government restricted UBCV charitable activities, senior UBCV monks travelled widely in November and December to flood-stricken areas of the country, distributing food and financial aid to several thousand flood victims. The UBCV reported having 20 representative boards in 15 cities and provinces. Provincial leaders of the UBCV throughout the southern region reported routine surveillance by local authorities. UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do stated he could meet with others inside and outside the pagoda.

The Hoa Hao Administrative Council is the officially recognized Hoa Hao body; however, several leaders of the Hoa Hao community openly criticized the council as overly subservient to the government. Dissenting Hoa Hao groups formed two smaller churches, the Traditional Hoa Hao Church and the Pure Hoa Hao Church. They faced some restrictions on their religious and political activities. The government prohibits commemorations of the disappearance of the Hoa Hao's founder and readings of his writings. The government permits publication of only five of 10 of the Hoa Hao's sacred books.

The government continued to assert that some ethnic minorities or Montagnards in the Central Highlands were operating a "Dega" church. The government accused the Dega churches of calling for the creation of an independent Montagnard state. The SECV and house churches in the provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Binh Phuoc, Phu Yen, and Dak Nong continued to experience government scrutiny because of feared association with separatist groups overseas.

The SECV reported the CRA issued an edict in November denying their request to revert to their pre-1975 organizational structure with districts underneath the central church's control. The CRA states that three-tiered leadership structures are not permitted under the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. The SECV said that this edict complicates their ability to manage their internal affairs.

The United Baptist Church reported in December that authorities in Da Nang Province opposed unregistered churches and pressured them to join the registered church.

A large Christmas event, with an anticipated attendance of several thousand individuals, organized by unrecognized evangelical Protestant denominations in Hanoi at the National Convention Center, was canceled at the last minute by city authorities due to the churches' unrecognized status.

The Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, an association of registered and unregistered denominations, reported that they were not permitted to register at the national level.

The Religious Publishing House had not acted on a longstanding request to allow printing of the Bible in the modern form of the H'mong language. The delay was due to the fact that the government recognizes only an archaic form of the H'mong language that is not in regular use today and cannot be read by the average H'mong.

Police regularly discouraged worshipers from visiting temples and facilities affiliated with the unrecognized Pure Hoa Hao Church in An Giang, Vinh Long, Dong Thap, and Can Tho, especially on church holidays related to the lunar calendar and the anniversary of the death of the founder of Hoa Hao Buddhism. Some ethnic minority worshippers in the Central Highlands – particularly in areas suspected to be affiliated with the "Dega" church – continued to be prevented from gathering to worship. The number of reported incidents was significantly lower

than in previous reporting periods and appeared to reflect individual local bias rather than central government policy. In some instances the local officials involved apologized and were reprimanded or fired.

In March, following two strokes in prison in July and November 2009, dissident Catholic priest Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly was granted a one-year humanitarian medical release to allow him to seek treatment for a brain tumor. Ly was arrested in 2007 for violating laws against "conducting propaganda against the state" due to his role in cofounding the Bloc 8406 movement and the Vietnam Progressive Party and was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment.

Catholic priest Pham Van Loi experienced similar restrictions on his freedom of movement for his involvement in political activities. The CRA asserted that Loi was not under house arrest and that the government did not restrict his religious activities. The movement of a number of other UBCV, Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Protestant dignitaries and believers was occasionally restricted or monitored by police.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country but no reports of religious prisoners and detainees.

Reports of abuses of religious freedom remained at a consistent level compared with the previous reporting period. Some religious believers continued to experience harassment or repression, particularly those who had not applied for or been granted legal sanction. In a number of instances, local officials forced church gatherings to cease, closed unregistered house churches, and pressured individuals to renounce their religious beliefs.

Several hundred parishioners protested the demolition of a large concrete cross by police at the Dong Chiem Catholic parish in January. Police dispersed the crowd with tear gas and beat approximately a dozen individuals. Two weeks later a Catholic monk was beaten unconscious by police as he tried to enter the Dong Chiem parish near where the cross was demolished. In February a group of nuns and other Catholics from Ho Chi Minh City making a pilgrimage to the parish were harassed by police and denied entry. Six Catholic parishioners involved in the original protest were detained and later released. The cross had been constructed without permission on land controlled by the military and was not removed upon request. The government claimed that no parishioners were injured in the demolition of the cross and that those who were detained had assaulted police.

In January in Phu Yen Province, two lay preachers affiliated with the Good News Mission Church, Ksor Y Du and Kpa Y Ko, were arrested for alleged connections with the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO) and for opposing the government. Police allegedly handcuffed and dragged Ksor Y Du behind a motorbike to the police station. The CRA asserted that both had long-time connections with FULRO, an armed guerilla group that sought the creation of an independent Montagnard state, and had prior convictions for "illegally crossing the border." The CRA contended that they had been "embroiled by hostile forces" in a plot to encourage a separatist movement by sowing division among ethnic communities. In November both were tried jointly and convicted in Phu Yen Provincial Court. Ksor Y Du was sentenced to six years' imprisonment and Kpa Y Ko to four years' imprisonment for attempting to organize demonstrations, causing political and security disorder, and dividing national solidarity.

The leadership and congregants of the Good News Mission Church in Dak Lak, Phu Yen, and Vinh Long continued to experience police harassment of congregations and demands to close due to government claims that local church leaders were connected with the FULRO. The Good News Mission Church said it prohibits all preachers from engaging in separatist activities.

In January local officials disrupted a two-week Bible training class for lay pastors organized by the Good News Mission Church in Vinh Long Province. The owner of the prayer house was fined one million VND (\$53).

Throughout 2009 and during the year, Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton, the head of the Full Gospel Church in Thanh Hoa Province, reported that local and provincial police harassed and beat church members at several different Full Gospel meeting points in Thanh Hoa. Local officials interrupted numerous church gatherings, detaining and physically abusing church members and leadership, including Pastor Ton and his family. Ton was a close affiliate of dissidents Le Thi Cong Nhan and Do Nam Hai and a member of "Bloc 8406."

In May and again in August, the UBCV in Da Nang was prohibited by police from holding Vesak Day and Vu Lan celebrations. On both occasions several hundred followers were denied entry into the Giac Minh Pagoda. In Ho Chi Minh City, the UBCV experienced an overall decrease in interference by government officials during the reporting period but reported heightened police observation during Vesak Day activities. In October and November, local police prohibited UBCV officials at the Kim Quang Temple in Hue from refurbishing and remodeling dilapidated facilities.

In May police clashed with local Catholics at a cemetery in Con Dau village outside Danang. In 2003 the government reached an agreement with Catholic officials to relocate parishioners while building an ecotourism resort in the area. Both sides agreed that a former Catholic cemetery within the construction zone would no longer be used, and the government designated a new cemetery. On May 4 when protesting parishioners attempted to bury the

remains of a local parishioner in the old Catholic cemetery that had been closed, police intervened. Parishioners reportedly attacked police who were blocking the entrance to the cemetery, and violence between police and parishioners ensued. Police arrested six parishioners accused of starting the altercation and damaging a police vehicle. On October 27 the six were tried for public disorder and sentenced; two individuals received nine- and 12-month jail sentences, and the remaining four defendants received suspended sentences. Three of the accused were denied their right to legal representation. An appeal by family members of the convicted was denied on the grounds that it was not filed by the convicted individuals directly.

Local security officials allegedly interrogated Nguyen Thanh Nam on two separate occasions for his involvement in the May clash. In July Nam died under unusual circumstances one day after being detained by police for attempted burglary. The accounts of the cause of Nam's death differed widely, even among family members. Some claimed the death was from natural causes, and others alleged it was the result of police beatings during interrogation. Nam's family denied efforts by police to conduct an autopsy and signed an affidavit claiming he died from a stroke. In October Nam's wife was pressured by security services to make a videotaped statement that Nam died of a stroke, but she refused.

In May Huynh Cam Tu, a priest with the unrecognized Cao Dai faith in Tay Ninh, was convicted of "slandering an on duty official." He remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

The congregation of the United Presbyterian Church in Da Nang, which was closed in May by police, was able to meet later in the year but was unable to register locally due to the fact that the church is not recognized nationally.

In Pha Xom Village in Xa Dung commune of Dien Bien Dong District in Dien Bien Province, in June the village chief asked several Protestant households to renounce their faith by December and return to traditional beliefs; otherwise, they would face expulsion from the village. The individuals claimed they were also fined 200,000 VND (\$10.50).

In August Pastor Duong Kim Khai from Ho Chi Minh City, affiliated with the unrecognized Mennonite Church, was arrested and charged with violating Article 79, "Attempting to Overthrow the Government," for his alleged ties to the Viet Tan while advocating on behalf of land rights claimants from Ben Tre and Dong Thap provinces. In November two others affiliated with the church, lay pastor Nguyen Chi Thanh and congregant Pham Ngoc Hoa, were similarly arrested for violating Article 79 for their alleged ties to the Viet Tan and work with Khai. All three awaited trial at year's end.

In An Giang Province members of an unregistered Hoa Hao group reported that in August police interfered with the religious ceremony of an unregistered monk and threw stones at him.

In November and December, the bishop of Kontum was restricted by local officials from visiting parishioners and conducting Mass in several districts of Kontum and Gia Lai provinces. At one location in Gia Lai Province, the bishop was harassed by a citizen gang that refused to permit his entry into the region.

Vu Duc Trung and Le Van Thanh, affiliated with the Falun Gong movement, were arrested in Hanoi in November for illegally broadcasting information into China. According to state-run media, Chinese officials asked the government to initiate the arrests. Both were awaiting trial at the end of the reporting period.

Several unrecognized Protestant denominations were prohibited from holding large-scale Christmas services in Hanoi, Danang, and Thanh Hoa.

An Assemblies of God house church in Tay Loc village, Dien Ngoc commune, Dien Chau district, Nghe An Province, reported harassment from local officials, including the Communal Party chief and People's Committee chairman, interruption of church services, and threats to "deport" congregants from the locality. Several adherents were then taken to police headquarters and questioned for several hours.

Some members of the Full Gospel Church in Tra Vinh Province alleged local government agencies asked Protestant followers to renounce their faith as a precondition for government assistance.

Several small house churches affiliated with the Inter-Evangelistic Movement (IEM) continued to report difficulties holding services in several locations in Dien Bien Province. In past years police actively dispersed meetings of worshippers, local authorities refused to register IEM meeting points, and authorities pressured followers to abandon their faith.

Individuals and churches affiliated with Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, including the Vietnam People's Christian Evangelical Fellowship Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Vietnam, continued to face difficulties in holding services from local officials due to Chinh's strident denunciations of the government and communism. The government continued to claim that Chinh used his position to conduct political activities.

At the end of the reporting period, police had not investigated the 2009 attacks on monks in the Plum Village Buddhist community center in Lam Dong Province and their subsequent eviction, nor had the authorities made any attempt to facilitate the monks' return.

At the end of the reporting period, police had not prosecuted anyone for the 2009 death of a Khmer Krom ethnic minority Protestant lay pastor in Tra Vinh Province, allegedly killed by other members of the Khmer ethnic minority. Some reports alleged the killing was instigated by local Buddhist leaders and sanctioned by local officials.

Local officials in several northwestern villages continued to attempt to convince or force H'mong Protestants to recant their faith. Local authorities encouraged clan elders to pressure members of their extended families to cease practicing Christianity and to return to traditional practices.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Some improvements in respect for religious freedom continued during the reporting period. In many areas Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai reported an increase in religious activity and observance. The government continued to ease restrictions placed upon most religious groups and expanded the number of religions that received national registration. The changes were primarily the result of continued implementation of revisions to the legal framework governing religion instituted in 2004 and 2005, as well as a more positive government attitude toward Protestant groups. During the reporting period, the government permitted large religious gatherings, such as annual Catholic celebrations at the La Vang Catholic sanctuary. Attendance at Christmas and Easter celebrations throughout the country exceeded the previous year's figures, and large celebrations were held in honor of Vesak in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and many other cities. Traditional pilgrimage events such as the Hung Kings' Festival, Buddhist ceremonies in Hue, and the Hoa Hao Founding Day, and commemoration of the founder's death also occurred without incident.

Five denominations affiliated with the umbrella association Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship organized a Christmas rally at an open field in Ho Chi Minh City. The denominations included the registered Vietnam Baptist Convention (Southern Baptist); the recognized Assembly of God; and three unregistered house church groups (United Presbyterian Church, United Gospel Outreach Church, and the Full Gospel Church). Approximately 20,000 persons gathered to celebrate and included an appeal for participants to become Christians. While organizers had difficulties gaining permission to hold the event, it went smoothly once consent was given and, for the first time, the service was broadcast live on the Internet.

A Christmas celebration in Hanoi organized by the ECVN attracted over a thousand adherents. Smaller events were held openly in other cities throughout the country. Catholics also held several large-scale Christmas and Easter Masses in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and throughout the southern part of the country with thousands of individuals participating in each event. Several provinces in the Northwest Highlands, in areas known for greater restrictions, allowed celebration of Christmas Mass for the first time. Mirroring large-scale Christmas celebrations, thousands of Protestants and Catholics participated in Easter services throughout the country, including in the Central Highlands.

In September authorities allowed more than 100,000 Cao Dai adherents gathered in Tay Ninh at the Cao Dai Church's Holy See to hold an annual banquet in honor of the Great Mother and Nine Goddesses of the Dieu Tri Palace.

In December CRA joined with the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) and the Institute for Religious Studies to host an academic conference on the history of Protestantism in the country from 1911 to 1975. Representatives from the party and CRA addressed the conference, as did regional government representatives from the center and southern portions of the country. Foreign and domestic representatives, including former foreign missionaries from several recognized Protestant churches, presented papers alongside government officials in order to prepare for the 100th anniversary of Protestantism in the country in 2011.

In cooperation with the IGE, CRA held three training courses with local and provincial level officials and local church leaders in Cao Bang, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien Province in November and December. ECVN contacts in the Northwest Highlands confirmed that authorities allowed nearly all unregistered congregations to worship in their homes and to meet openly, in accordance with the prime minister's 2005 instruction. The government held discussions about registration and recognition procedures with leaders of a number of Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist Church, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Hoa Hao, Muslims, and Protestants engaged in aid programs contributing over 313 trillion VND (\$15 million) collectively throughout the year. Their efforts included assisting persons with HIV/AIDS, disaster relief, and work with orphans and at-risk children. A large number of faith-based nongovernmental organizations conducted and expanded their charitable activities supported by private donors, international organizations, and foreign governments. The Catholic charity Caritas held training courses for social workers assisting persons with HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. They also conducted disaster relief operations providing assistance to typhoon victims. Caritas' total contributions throughout the year were 21.84 billion VND (\$1.15 million). In Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and Haiphong, the Catholic Church joined with the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in supporting HIV/AIDS hospices and treatment centers and providing counseling services to young persons. The church also operated a shelter for HIV-positive mothers and HIV-infected children.

There were also numerous interfaith efforts in the charitable arena. Buddhists, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Catholics, and Protestant churches continued joint work in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Hoa Hao Executive Council also continued to be very active in local charitable and development projects, including building upwards of 800 houses for impoverished families regardless of religious affiliation. The Hoa Hao also spent significant resources on managing local health clinics, and in 2009 spent more than 39 billion VND (\$ 2 million) on charitable activities. During the year they spent approximately 29 billion VND (\$1.5 million) on similar efforts.

For the first time, the UN Independent Expert on minority issues visited the country in July, met with Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem, traveled throughout the country, and met with ethnic minority religious leaders. A delegation from the World Council of Churches traveled to the country in October and met with several senior government leaders. In November the Vietnamese ambassador to the United States spoke at the Global Faith Forum in Southlake, Texas, hosted by Pastor Bob Roberts.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were few reported instances of societal discrimination or violence based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period.

Protestant Khmers reported harassment, intimidation, and, in some cases, property damage and beatings by Khmer Krom Buddhists in certain districts of Tra Vinh Province. They reported that authorities did little to prevent the incidents and, in some cases, may have participated in or instigated the actions.

In January a dispute between representatives of the officially recognized Cao Dai Church and an unrecognized congregation in Dong Nai Province led to the eviction of the unrecognized congregation from a Cao Dai meeting house long controlled by the congregation. Leaders of the officially recognized Cao Dai faith acknowledged the divisions and said that the unrecognized congregation had been asked to disband and return the property several times previously but without success.

An SECV Protestant congregation and its pastor in Xi Thoai Village in Phu Yen Province were attacked three times by a gang of local thugs in June and July. The gang beat the pastor's wife and destroyed his home. Local officials denied involvement, promised to investigate the incident, and met with church leaders to apologize. One of the attackers was later suspended from a police school, and two others were denied admittance to the army after their participation in the attack was confirmed. In December the deputy CPV chief for the province met with the SECV and reaffirmed local authorities' promises to investigate the earlier abuse.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy in Hanoi and the consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City actively and regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of CPV leaders and government officials, including the president, prime minister, and senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Committee for Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and the provinces. The mission also maintained regular contact with religious leaders and dissidents throughout the country and routinely visited religious leaders throughout the country.

Secretary of State Clinton, in meetings with government officials, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Other senior State Department officials also raised religious freedom during their meetings with government officials during the year. Religious freedom also was a major focus of the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in December.

The ambassador and embassy officers urged recognition of a broad spectrum of religious groups, including the UBCV, Protestant house churches, and dissenting Hoa Hao groups; sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups; and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. The ambassador and embassy officials raised specific cases of government harassment against Catholics, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, unrecognized Hoa Hao sects, and Protestant churches with the CRA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Public Security. The ambassador also requested the government investigate alleged abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. Embassy officials called for the registration of churches and peaceful resolution of longstanding property disputes. U.S. government officials also repeatedly urged the government to resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious organizations peacefully.

Embassy and consulate general officials traveled throughout the country to monitor the religious freedom environment, meet with religious leaders, and stress to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship. Representatives of the embassy and the consulate general had frequent contact with leaders of all major religious communities. Embassy and consulate general officers also met regularly with provincial representative boards of more than 25 Protestant groups from a wide variety of theological backgrounds, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands. The embassy and consulate general held several religious freedom roundtables during the reporting period to receive updates from recognized Protestant churches and unrecognized house churches on the status of religious freedom.

