



HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

PERSECUTING “EVIL WAY” RELIGION

Abuses against Montagnards in Vietnam



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Map of Vietnam



Summary

Every time the police summoned me to the commune police station, they beat me and denied me food. I was placed in a small room with hands tied and an interrogator beat me. I was kept in that position overnight, too.

–Montagnard asylum seeker from Gia Lai province, February 2015

Using many methods of propaganda and mobilization, in coordination with the participation of the entire political system and the leadership and guidance from provincial leaders, the objects who once made errors have voluntarily committed to completely renounce the evil way religion. In the near future, the district will ask for provincial permission to summarize and announce that the evil way religion has been eliminated.

–Chairman Nguyen Truong, People’s Committee of Dak Po district, *Bao Gia Lai* newspaper, October 21, 2014

Government-controlled Vietnamese media and Human Rights Watch interviews with members of ethnic minorities who have fled the Central Highlands of Vietnam reveal ongoing government religious and political persecution there. Highland people accused of religious “evil ways” and politically “autonomous thoughts” have been subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and mistreatment in custody. These violations of fundamental rights are part of a larger pattern of religious persecution in Vietnam in which the authorities monitor, harass, and sometimes violently crack down on religious groups that operate outside official government-registered and government-controlled religious institutions.¹

Legal mechanisms for Vietnamese government control over religion were increased in January 2013 when the government promulgated Decree 92, which prohibits “manipulation of freedom of belief and religion” to “conduct propaganda against the state” or “undermine ... national unity.” It includes onerous requirements for official permission to

¹ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2015* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2015), Vietnam chapter, <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/vietnam>.

practice religious beliefs and vague prohibitions on religious expression, making it easier for the authorities to selectively repress any religious activities they desire.²

This persecution is driving Christians from Montagnard ethnic minorities to seek asylum in neighboring Cambodia and in Thailand. Vietnamese authorities have responded by preventing people from leaving Vietnam and pressuring Cambodian authorities to prevent border crossings and deny those who do cross the right to seek asylum.

Members of the Jarai and other Montagnard ethnic minorities from Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces explained to Human Rights Watch how during 2014 and early 2015 they were detained by commune or district police and other authorities for questioning about their religious or political activities and possible plans to flee Vietnam. Detention periods lasted from a few hours to several months.

They told Human Rights Watch of being kept under constant surveillance by the authorities and instructed not to believe in forms of Christianity not approved by the government, to reject notions of ethnic minority political autonomy, and to give up hopes of gaining refuge abroad. Some alleged that police beat or slapped them during interrogation.

In one case an elderly Montagnard in poor health as a result of earlier ill-treatment during years in a Vietnamese prison died in the Gia Lai jungle while trying to make his way to Cambodia.

The current persecution is being carried out against what Vietnamese authorities call “objects” (*doi tuong*) of security force suspicions. These include those who subscribe to beliefs the Vietnamese government maintains are “set up by the reactionaries” to oppose Communist Party rule and achieve other “dark purposes,”³ such as to “abuse the freedom of belief to sow division among the national great unity.”⁴ Official media reports describe the security forces as taking action against minority “peaceful evolution” activists

² Human Rights Watch, “Vietnam Universal Periodic Review Submission 2013,” January 7, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/07/vietnam-universal-periodic-review-submission-2013>.

³ “Peace Returns to Kuk Kun and Kut Dak Villages” (Bình yên trở lại ở làng Kuk Kun và Kut Đăk), *Báo tin tức*, December 25, 2014, <http://m.baotintuc.vn/xa-hoi/binh-yen-tro-lai-o-lang-kuk-kun-va-kut-dak-20141225091255046.htm> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁴ “Conference Summing Up the Work of the Struggle to Eliminate Ha Mon Ways” (Hội nghị tổng kết công tác đấu tranh xóa bỏ đạo Hà Môn), *Gia Lai TV*, November 13, 2014, <http://gialaitv.vn/article/108957/hoi-nghi-tong-ket-cong-tac-dau-tranh-xoa-bo-dao-ha-mon.aspx> (accessed April 19, 2015).

protesting against shortcomings in Communist Party policies related to “national minorities,” including allegations that the authorities are violating their human rights.⁵ The Vietnamese authorities deny these violations are occurring and characterize them as a fabricated excuse⁶ for committing the crime of illegally leaving Vietnam for Cambodia.⁷

Official Vietnamese media makes it clear that such government actions are part of a high-level policy to eliminate “evil way” (*ta dao*) religions, such as the De Ga Protestantism and Ha Mon Catholicism practiced by some ethnic Montagnards,⁸ which the government has deemed fall outside the belief systems considered “pure.”⁹ Their beliefs and faith practices are suppressed on the grounds that they are not religions at all, but simply “evil ways.”

Gia Lai provincial television has reported that local officials have organized “many waves of search and hunt” actions against unofficial religious activities in order to “deal seriously with their leaders and core members.”¹⁰ The authorities concede that one of the main reasons that highland Christian minorities are seeking asylum abroad is their hope of making their way to a place where they can “freely practice” their religion.¹¹

The government’s actions violate its obligations under international human rights treaties to which Vietnam is a party, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

⁵ “Be Vigilant Against Games to Wreck the Policy of Great National Unity” (Cảnh giác với những chiêu trò phá hoại chính sách đại đoàn kết dân tộc), *Quân đội nhân dân*, October 20, 2014, <http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/canh-giac-voi-nhung-chieu-tro-pha-hoi-chinh-sach-dai-doan-ket-dan-toc/327487.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁶ “A Number of Experiences in Popular Mobilization Work of Mobile Police Forces in the Areas of Minority Nationality Compatriots” (Một số kinh nghiệm trong công tác dân vận ở vùng đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số của lực lượng CSCĐ), *Công an Kon Tum*, November 8, 2014, <http://congankontum.gov.vn/hdcat/xay-dung-luc-luong-ca/52912-mot-so-kinh-nghiem-trong-cong-tac-dan-van-o-vung-dong-bao-dan-toc-thieu-so-cua-luc-luong-cscd.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁷ “Strengthening the Struggle to Defend Against Persons Illegally Crossing the Border in the Western Highlands Region” (Tăng cường đấu tranh phòng, chống người vượt biên trái phép trên địa bàn Tây Nguyên), March 26, 2014, http://daklak.gov.vn/portal/page/portal/daklak/tuyen-truyen/bien-gioi-bien-dao?p_page_id=19161438&pers_id=&folder_id=8459244&item_id=19993539&p_details=1 (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁸ “Eliminate the Reactionary FULRO Organization, the ‘Ha Mon’ Evil Way, and ‘Dega Protestantism’” (Xóa bỏ tổ chức phản động Phun-rô, tà đạo ‘Hà Môn’ và ‘Tin lành Đêga’), *An ninh Thủ đô*, January 17, 2014, <http://www.anninhthudo.vn/thoi-su/xoa-bo-to-chuc-phan-dong-phunro-ta-dao-ha-mon-va-tin-lanh-dega/533598.antd> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁹ “Boost Propaganda on Beliefs and Religion and Elimination of Evil Ways” (Đẩy mạnh tuyên truyền về tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo, xóa bỏ tà đạo), *Báo tin tức*, June 26, 2014, <http://baotintuc.vn/chinh-tri/day-manh-tuyen-truyen-ve-tin-nguong-ton-giao-xoa-bo-ta-dao-20140626153137254.htm> (accessed April 19, 2015).

¹⁰ “When the Party Promotes the Role of Leadership Cores” (Khi Đảng phát huy vai trò hạt nhân lãnh đạo), *Gia Lai TV*, January 31, 2015, http://gialaitv.vn/new/155_111278_khi-dang-phat-huy-vai-tro-hat-nhan-lanh-dao.aspx (accessed April 19, 2015).

¹¹ “The Ma Dot Story” (Chuyện của Ma Dốt), *Báo Phú Yên*, April 16, 2015, <http://www.baophuyen.com.vn/382/130770/chuyen-cua-ma-dot.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

(ICCPR)¹² and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).¹³ The ICCPR upholds the right to freedom of religion and belief; the right to freedom of expression and opinion; the right not to be subject to torture or other ill-treatment; and the right of everyone to leave any country, including their own, among other rights.¹⁴

In addition, Cambodia, as a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (the “Refugee Convention”), is bound not to return a refugee or asylum seeker to any country where their life or freedom is at risk.¹⁵

The ethnic and religious persecution documented in this report is a continuation of past persecution in the Central Highlands. Previous reports, including by Human Rights Watch, have documented violations of the human rights of evangelical Christians belonging to independent house churches, supporters of nonviolent demands for independence or autonomy, and people objecting to the transfer of land and forests traditionally used by highlanders to support themselves to the control of lowland ethnic Vietnamese (*kinh*) businesses and settlers.¹⁶ There is also a history of attempts by members of minority groups to leave Vietnam in order to seek asylum in Cambodia or elsewhere.

The authorities have asserted that advocacy by some De Ga Protestants of the notion of a “De Ga Country” (*Nha nuoc De ga*) was a cover for the resurrection of the armed separatist insurgency of the Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées (United Front for the Liberation

¹² International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Vietnam on September 24, 1982.

¹³ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted December 21, 1965, G.A. Res. 2106 (XX), annex, 20 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 14) at 47, U.N. Doc. A/6014 (1966), 660 U.N.T.S. 195, entered into force January 4, 1969, ratified by Vietnam on June 9, 1982. ICERD defines racial discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.”

¹⁴ See ICCPR, arts. 7, 12, 18, and 19. See also ICERD, art. 8.

¹⁵ Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 189 U.N.T.S. 150, entered into force April 22, 1954; Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, 606 U.N.T.S. 267, entered into force Oct. 4, 1967. This is the fundamental refugee law principle of nonrefoulement.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, Montagnard Christians in Vietnam: A Case Study in Religious Repression, March 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/vietnam0311Web.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, No Sanctuary: Ongoing Threats to Indigenous Montagnards in Vietnam’s Central Highlands, vol. 18, no. 4(C), June 2006, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/vietnam0606/vietnam0606webfullwcover.pdf>.

of Oppressed Races, or FULRO) launched in the 1960s. However, even an official history of the Vietnamese security forces and another security force publication have declared that FULRO ceased to exist in 1992, since which time violent change has been replaced by “peaceful evolution.” The history also acknowledges that problems arising since 1992 have resulted in part from the Vietnamese authorities’ own “shortcomings” in dealing with the rapid expansion of market economics in the Central Highlands, causing “powerful changes” in the social structure there, with “uneven effects on the residents of the area.”¹⁷ Recent media reports present no evidence that any armed or other violent activities have taken place and continue to describe only “peaceful evolution” activities.¹⁸

The Vietnamese government should cease its systematic religious and other persecution of the Montagnard population in the Central Highlands. Donors and other governments should urgently heighten international scrutiny of the situation in the highlands. Diplomatic action and targeted sanctions, including on trade agreements, should be stepped up to press the Vietnamese government to finally end these abuses, which are a relic from previous eras and an affront to fundamental human rights.

¹⁷ Thi Văn Tâm, et al., eds, *Những Trang Sử Vĩ Vang Của Lực Lượng An Ninh Nhân Dân Việt Nam Anh Hùng* [The Glorious History of the Heroic Vietnamese People's Security Forces] (Hanoi: Peoples Public Security Publishing House, 2006), <http://www.congan.com.vn/?mod=detnews&catid=702&id=157122>, pp.180-182.

¹⁸ “On Defending Against the ‘Peaceful Evolution’ Strategy in the Western Highlands”, (*Về phòng, chống chiến lược “Diễn biến hòa bình” ở Tây Nguyên*), *Tạp chí Quốc phòng toàn dân*, June 24, 2014, <http://tapchiquptd.vn/vi/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/ve-phong-chong-chien-luoc-dien-bien-hoa-binh-o-tay-nguyen/5821.html> (accessed May 10, 2015).

Methodology

This report is based on research conducted by Human Rights Watch in Cambodia and Thailand from February to June 2015. The organization interviewed 21 Montagnard asylum seekers who left the Central Highland provinces of Gia Lai and Dak Lak in 2014 or 2015. The interviews were conducted in Jarai or Vietnamese with interpretation in English, sometimes via Khmer. Identities often were established using Vietnamese government photo identification cards. In many cases details of asylum seeker testimonies were corroborated by Vietnamese local police documents issued to the interviewees before leaving Vietnam. Further specifics about interviewees and the circumstances of interviews in Cambodia and Thailand are being withheld because many of them expressed concern that details could subject relatives and associates still in Vietnam to government retaliation, as well as because of the precarious situations faced by asylum seekers in Cambodia and Thailand, including the threat of forced return (refoulement).

In an evident attempt to hide religious persecution in the Central Highlands from international attention, the government has repeatedly refused, limited, or deterred access to the area by foreign organizations concerned with human rights.

In July 2014, while the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Heiner Bielefeldt was visiting Vietnam on an official mission, police intimidated and put many lowland dissidents and religious activists under house arrest so they could not meet him. Fearing for the safety of other activists, Bielefeldt cut short his planned visits to three locations, including the Central Highland provinces of Gia Lai and Kon Tum. He concluded that the “tight control that the Government exercises on religious communities” means that the “autonomy and activities of independent religious or belief communities, that is, unrecognized communities, remain restricted and unsafe, with the rights to freedom of religion or belief of such communities grossly violated.”¹⁹

¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, Addendum, Mission to Viet Nam (21 to 31 July 2014), A/HRC/28/66/Add.2, January 30, 2015, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session28/Documents/A_HRC_28_66_Add.2_E.doc (accessed February 1, 2015).

I. Background

Over the past decade and a half, the Vietnamese government has launched a series of crackdowns on ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Since the French colonial period, these and other upland peoples have been collectively known as Montagnards, or “highlanders.”²⁰ They are known in Vietnamese as “*người thượng*,” and also live in northeastern Cambodia and southeastern Laos. Anthropologists and the Vietnamese state have categorized them into a number of “minority nationality” (*dan tộc thiểu số*) or ethnic groups based on language and other criteria. These include the ethnically related Jarai (Gia Rai) and E De (Rhade) groups living in Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Kon Tum provinces of Vietnam and Ratanakiri province of Cambodia. Precolonial Montagnard religious beliefs have been characterized as animist or spirit-worship. During the French colonial period, Catholic missionaries converted some Montagnards to Christianity. After two separate independent Vietnamese states were formed in 1954, Protestant missionaries became increasingly active among highlanders in the southern Republic of Vietnam.²¹

Between 1954 and 1975, the Central Highlands were contested between the US-backed anti-communist Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and insurgents linked to the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). Highland communities were politically split between those variously allied with the communist insurgents, the US military and US Central Intelligence Agency, and the South Vietnamese government in Saigon. Conversion to Christianity was particularly marked among highlanders allied with the United States, including Jarai and E De. Some among these groups were also linked to FULRO, the armed insurgent movement that emerged in the 1960s which advocated Montagnard and other ethnic minorities’ autonomy from Vietnam.²²

²⁰ John McKinnon and Jean Michaud, “Montagnard Domain in the South-East Asian Massif,” in *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif*, ed. Jean Michaud (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), pp. 5-6.

²¹ Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contestualization, 1850-1900* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp.1-178; Masako Ito, *Politics of Ethnic Classification in Vietnam* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2013), pp.17-38; Vũ Khánh, *Người Gia Rai ở Tây Nguyên* (Hanoi: Nha Xuất Bản Thông Tin, 2012), pp. 6-13, 98-103.

²² Salemink, *Ethnography*, pp.179-256; Thomas L. Ahren, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counter-Insurgency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), pp. 39-70; Ngõn Vĩnh, *FULRO* (Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh: Van Hoc Publishing House, 1995), pp. 5-11, 117-118, 207-212, 178-191, 242-252; Po Dharma, *Du FLM au FULRO: Une Lutte des minorités du sud indochinois (1955-1975)* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2006), pp. 49-162.

After the 1975 communist victory in the war in Vietnam and subsequent unification of the country as a Socialist Republic, anti-communist Jarai and other Montagnards, including Christians and FULRO veterans, were a target of particular suspicion by the new government. Some fled into the jungle, while others were arrested and sent for years to reeducation camps where they were often subjected to severe ill-treatment. Those who remained in their villages in the highlands suffered various forms of persecution in the context of government efforts to transform the Central Highlands along socialist lines and, later, other forms of often predatory state-defined economic and administrative modernization that entailed loss of Montagnard control over ancestral lands. Those in the jungle were pursued by government armed forces, and many died in combat or as a result of the extremely difficult conditions they experienced. FULRO remnants eventually fled to Cambodia, where the last of the insurgency gave up armed struggle in 1992.²³

By this time De Ga Christianity had emerged as an important religion among anti-communist and other Jarai, and other new forms of Christianity, such as Ha Mon Catholicism, had also spread among Central Highland groups. A number of mostly Christian Montagnards with historical links to the US presence in Vietnam resettled abroad, particularly in the US, as refugees.²⁴

Inside the Central Highlands, De Ga and the other novel Christian movements increasingly combined evangelical beliefs with Montagnard aspirations for greater civil freedoms, protection of ancestral lands, and, for some, autonomy or self-rule, but without any particular political leadership or organization. In February 2001, mass protests broke out in four Central Highland provinces as thousands of demonstrators marched to demand return of ancestral lands and religious freedom. More large protests took place in 2002, 2004, and 2008. The government reacted with repression that combined military and police operations with intensive propaganda campaigns. Hundreds were arrested, followed by trials and imprisonment of Jarai and others for their religious and political beliefs and nonviolent activities. The government's objectives were to force Montagnards to renounce De Ga and other disallowed beliefs and thus stamp them out, end related political dissent,

²³ Nate Thayer, "The Forgotten Army: The rebels time forgot," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 10, 1992.

²⁴ Thomas Pearson, *Missions and Conversions: Creating the Montagnard-Dega Refugee Community* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.63-116; Salemink, *Ethnography*, pp. 262-286.

and ensure no further popular unrest. These government objectives have been neither achieved nor abandoned.

In 2005, government “Instruction No. 1” reinforced longstanding requirements for religious groups to obtain official permission in order to be able to operate, providing a further legal basis for attempting to eliminate De Ga and other religious activities deemed “reactionary.”²⁵

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Montagnard Christians in Vietnam*, pp. 4-14.

II. Intimidation, Arbitrary Detention, and Ill-Treatment

Vietnamese media reports and personal accounts by Montagnard asylum seekers provide a picture of oppressive government policies and practices against Central Highlands Montagnards in Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces. These include violations of internationally protected rights to be free from arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; as well as the rights to freedom of religion, association, and expression.

Personal Accounts

Montagnards Human Rights Watch spoke to outside Vietnam described government persecution and ill-treatment by the security forces of those in custody. A Montagnard from Chu Se district of Gia Lai told Human Rights Watch in February 2015:

Because they did not want us to follow our Christianity but their Christianity, they kept us under surveillance.... There are mostly undercover police in the village, although they are sometimes armed and in uniform. If villagers are asked to “work with”²⁶ the police, they go to the commune police place after being summoned there, sometimes orally, sometimes with a document. Sometimes it’s an hour or a few hours, sometimes two or three days.

He described his treatment while being interrogated:

I have been summoned to the commune many times, often after worship, which is normally on Wednesdays and Sundays. They asked what is the use of belief in De Ga and why we don’t follow the authorized Christianity. Some of the police are Jarai, so they can interrogate in Jarai. Every time the police summoned me to the commune police station, they beat me and denied me food. I was placed in a small room with hands tied and an interrogator beat me. I was kept in that position overnight, too.

²⁶ “*Lam vïec*,” an official term often used as a euphemism for interrogation. Human Rights Watch, *Public Insecurity: Deaths in Custody and Police Brutality in Vietnam*, September 2014, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/vietnam0914_ForUpload_o.pdf, pp.19-21, 63, 73.

Another Montagnard from Chu Se district of Gia Lai told Human Rights Watch in April 2015: “I was invited to the police station and held for one day. They ... asked me to sign a document promising to stop practicing De Ga religion and also not to bring anyone to Cambodia; otherwise, according to the paper [they gave me], I would be arrested.” He said that although the police let him go, they then “came every day to my house and asked where I was going and what I was doing.” He explained that the authorities said he had to renounce De Ga beliefs because they constituted a “wrong religion.” He also stated that the authorities prohibited any talk about a “De Ga homeland” and named several Jarai he believes had been arrested for violating this ban. Asked by Human Rights Watch about FULRO, he said that although he had heard of it, he did not know what it was. He commented that the police had asked him the same question.

In June 2015, a Montagnard from Chu Puh district of Gia Lai told Human Rights Watch:

I had a church in my village but the police forced it to shut down. If we were going to carry on worshipping, the police were going to arrest us. It was the commune police who came and forced us to shut the church in July 2014. We can’t practice our religion in our village or anywhere else.

He said that he had been detained by the police in February 2014 for three days and in March 2014 for a day and two nights, and that on one of these occasions,

I was hit everywhere; they even used electricity to shock me. They used it so I would answer their questions. The police hit me with their hands on both sides of the face. After they hit me I couldn’t hear anything from my ears.... The police told me if I continued going to church, then the police would continue arresting me.... I was scared that I would get into trouble with the police again, so that is why I left Vietnam.

A Montagnard from Dak Lak province interviewed by Human Rights Watch in April 2015 reported being arrested after participating in a religious festival in late 2014. While the detainee was taken to a district police station, other police warned family members to stop their Christian worship. During the interrogation at the station, the police allegedly slapped and applied an electroshock weapon, resulting in a permanent injury causing loss of hearing.

A resident from Phu Thien district of Gia Lai told Human Rights Watch in April 2015 about having been “invited many times” to “work with” police at various levels. He said the last time was in October or November 2014, just before he left for Cambodia. He explained, “On that occasion, the province police accused me of religious mobilization and opposing the government, and they warned that if I did not stop my contacts with people, they would arrest me.” Asked about FULRO, he said he knew about it from the Internet and had been asked by the police about it, but he did not know “what it does concretely,” and had never “met a FULRO in the flesh.” He said that the De Ga religion was not a FULRO creation. He explained that talk about a “De Ga homeland” expressed an aspiration for “freedom to practice our religion while also getting back the land the Vietnamese took from us,” adding that he and other De Ga believers were leaving Vietnam “because we cannot achieve religious freedom or get our land back in Vietnam.”

In an April 2015 interview, an asylum seeker from Duc Co district of Gia Lai described how in April 2014 his whole family—his father, mother, sister, and himself—were arrested and sent to the district police where they were detained in separate rooms and questioned. The police arrested him on his way to his farmland and put a hood over his head before bringing him to a district police station. He said he was beaten during interrogation before being released.

Vietnamese Media Accounts

The current campaign of religious and political persecution of ethnic minorities was given authoritative impetus in a January 2014 speech by General Tran Dai Quang, Vietnam’s Minister of Public Security and Chairman of the Communist Party’s Steering Committee for what the government calls the “Western Highlands.” He called on security forces in the Western Highlands to “actively fight” to eliminate “reactionary organizations” and “evil way” religions, including De Ga Protestant Christianity.²⁷

²⁷ “Eliminate the Reactionary FULRO Organization, the ‘Ha Mon’ Evil Ways, and ‘Dega Protestantism’” (Xóa bỏ tổ chức phản động Phun-rô, tà đạo ‘Hà Môn’ và ‘Tin lành Đêga’), *An ninh Thủ đô*, <http://www.anninhthudo.vn/thoi-su/xoa-bo-to-chuc-phan-dong-phunro-ta-dao-ha-mon-va-tin-lanh-dega/533598.antd>.

Vietnamese security forces formulated plans to intensify patrols “to fight against and prevent illegal missionary” activities.²⁸ In carrying out this campaign, the authorities were particularly concerned about De Ga activities in Chu Pah, Chu Se, and Chu Puh districts of Gia Lai, and Krong An district and Buon Ma Thuot town of Dak Lak.²⁹ They also seemed determined to end to any attempts by minority people to make their way to Cambodia, usually by crossing into Ratanakiri province, or to Thailand.³⁰

According to online Vietnamese police newspapers, the Western Highlands Security Department (Ago) of the ministry’s General Department of Security II is the Ministry of Public Security unit with overall responsibility for these and other police operations in provinces where there are substantial minority populations—Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Kon Tum, and Dak Nong. Set up in 2004 and headquartered in Buon Me Thuot, the provincial seat of Dak Lak, Ago works with provincial, district, and commune police to achieve its security goals. Local police are dedicated to reducing the number of De Ga believers and preventing the growth of “hotspots” of De Ga activities, such as protests. Ago works to prevent Montagnards from leaving the country in cooperation with the Cambodian police in Ratanakiri and other provinces.³¹

²⁸ “Western Highlands Security Department: 10-Year Anniversary of Its Foundation and Welcoming Its Receipt of the Title of Hero of the People’s Armed Forces” (Cục An ninh Tây Nguyên: Kỷ niệm 10 năm ngày thành lập và đón nhận danh hiệu Anh hùng Lực lượng vũ trang nhân dân), *Báo Công an nhân dân*, July 17, 2014, <http://cand.com.vn/Cong-an/Cuc-An-ninh-Tay-Nguyen-Ky-niem-10-nam-ngay-thanh-lap-va-don-nhan-danh-hieu-Anh-hung-Luc-luong-vu-trang-nhan-dan-266454/> (accessed April 19, 2015).

²⁹ “A Number of Recent Operations Against Hostile Forces”, (Một số hoạt động chống phá của các thế lực thù địch thời gian gần đây), June 24, 2014, <http://www.haugiang.gov.vn/Portal/HtmlView.aspx?pageid=3026&ItemID=24167&mid=5180&pageindex=6&siteid=59> (accessed April 19, 2015).

³⁰ “A Sad Scene When Her Husband and Children Follow the FULRO Reactionaries” (Cảnh buồn khi chồng, con theo phản động Fulro), *Truyền hình Công an Nhân dân*, March 6, 2014, <http://www.antv.gov.vn/tin-tuc/an-ninh-trat-tu/canh-buon-khi-chong-con-theo-phan-dong-fulro-3133.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

³¹ “Western Highlands Security Department: 10-Year Anniversary of Its Foundation and Welcoming Its Receipt of the Title of Hero of the People’s Armed Forces” (Cục An ninh Tây Nguyên: Kỷ niệm 10 năm ngày thành lập và đón nhận danh hiệu Anh hùng Lực lượng vũ trang nhân dân), *Báo Công an nhân dân*, <http://cand.com.vn/Cong-an/Cuc-An-ninh-Tay-Nguyen-Ky-niem-10-nam-ngay-thanh-lap-va-don-nhan-danh-hieu-Anh-hung-Luc-luong-vu-trang-nhan-dan-266454/>; “Kon Tum Province Police Sum Up the Work of 2014, Initiate the 2015 Work Program” (Công an tỉnh Kon Tum tổng kết công tác năm 2014, triển khai chương trình công tác năm 2015), *Công an Kon Tum*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.congankontum.gov.vn/hdcat/xay-dung-luc-luong-ca/53305-cong-an-tinh-kon-tum-tong-ket-cong-tac-nam-2014-trien-khai-chuong-trinh-cong-tac-nam-2015.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

An official provincial newspaper reports that security force operations affecting highland minorities also involve provincial military forces of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA).³² Provincial military units coordinate their operations with both the police and the troops of the VPA's Border Defense Forces.³³ Like the Vietnamese police, such other Vietnamese security forces coordinate their operations with Cambodian counterparts.³⁴

Certain highly specialized national security force contingents are an additional part of this mixture of forces, such as a police canine unit. According to a Vietnamese police website, its officers and dogs have been used by the Gia Lai province police to sniff out fugitive De Ga believers in hiding so that they could be arrested.³⁵

Another report in a provincial newspaper explains that under the guidance of provincial authorities the “entire political system” down to districts, communes, and villages is also deployed to carry out coordinated “propaganda, proselytization, and struggle” against the “evil ways” of unauthorized forms of Christianity in order to eliminate its practice. This includes the deployment of work teams that conduct surveillance of suspected “wrong-believers” in their homes and fields 24 hours a day to ascertain “their inner thoughts and wishes” as part of efforts to get them to “voluntarily” renounce their religion.³⁶ Such operations also involve the commune and district police.³⁷ They include the convening of district-level gatherings at which parents and siblings of believers are

³² “Strengthen the Struggle Against Illegal Border Crossing” (Tăng cường đấu tranh phòng-chống vượt biên trái phép), *Báo Gia Lai*, February 1, 2015, <http://www.baogialai.com.vn/channel/9702/201502/tang-cuong-dau-tranh-phong-chong-vuot-bien-trai-phep-2367710/> (accessed April 19, 2015).

³³ “Strengthen the Blocking of Situations of Illegal Border Crossing into Cambodia” (Tăng cường ngăn chặn tình trạng vượt biên trái phép sang Cam-pu-chia), December 30, 2014, <http://www.bienphong.com.vn/tang-cuong-ngan-chan-tinh-trang-vuot-bien-trai-phep-sang-cam-pu-chia/29089.bbp> (accessed April 19, 2015).

³⁴ “Firmly Safeguard the Sovereignty and Border Security of the Country” (Bảo vệ vững chắc chủ quyền an ninh biên giới quốc gia), *Gia Lai TV*, March 3, 2015, <http://gialaitv.vn/article/112106/bao-ve-vung-chac-chu-quyen-an-ninh-bien-gioi-quoc.aspx> (accessed April 19, 2015).

³⁵ “The Police Force Puts the Big Dogs Through Their Paces” (Lực lượng cảnh khuyển lập nhiều chiến công lớn), November 15, 2014, <http://congan.com.vn/?mod=detnews&catid=708&p=&id=528829> (accessed January 21, 2015).

³⁶ “Dispel the Poisonous Wind of the Evil Way Known as ‘Ha Mon’” (Xua tan cơn gió độc mang tên tà đạo ‘Hà Môn’), *Báo Gia Lai*, October 21, 2014, <http://baogialai.com.vn/channel/8211/201410/xua-tan-con-gio-doc-mang-ten-ta-dao-ha-mon-2346262/> (accessed April 19, 2015).

³⁷ “The Folks Voluntarily Renounce FULRO-Dega Protestantism” (Bà con tự nguyện từ bỏ Fulro - tin lành Đêga), *Truyền hình Công an Nhân dân*, February 23, 2014, <http://www.antv.gov.vn/tin-tuc/xa-hoi/ba-con-tu-nguyen-tu-bo-fulro-tin-lanh-dega-2534.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

mobilized to persuade family members deemed “objects” to abandon their faith.³⁸ They also aim to get such people to “apologize” in writing for “participating in protests and activities ... promoting autonomous thoughts.”³⁹ These actions are combined with “invitations” (*giay moi*) and “appointments” (*giay trieu tap*) issued to “objects” by commune, district, and provincial police to come “work” (*lam viec*) with them,⁴⁰ a euphemism for interrogation.⁴¹

Vietnamese media reports indicate this array of persecution techniques has run up against increasing difficulties. One article states that resurgent “evil way” religious belief activities, including those of De Ga Protestant Christians, became more “complicated” starting in March 2014. The Vietnamese news site PetroTimes reported that to deal with this situation the Communist Party Standing Committees of the three highland provinces of Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Kon Tum launched intensified operations to “hunt and arrest” the alleged “core leaders” of these activities.⁴² In April 2014, the chief of the Gia Lai province police said during a provincial party conference that he was determined to more “actively ... discover and deal with De Ga Protestant groups in their local communities.”⁴³ District authorities also organized “many waves of search and hunt” actions against unofficial religious practices in order to “deal seriously with their leaders and core members.”⁴⁴

A conference of the Gia Lai Province Military command on January 30, 2015, reported that over the previous year it had uncovered “19 spots of De Ga Protestantism operating secretly,” eight of which it said had been “eliminated.”⁴⁵ According to the Vietnamese

³⁸ “Peace Returns to Kuk Kun and Kut Dak Villages” (Bình yên trở lại ở làng Kuk Kun và Kut Đăk), *Báo tin tức*, <http://m.baotintuc.vn/xa-hoi/binh-yen-tro-lai-o-lang-kuk-kun-va-kut-dak-20141225091255046.htm>.

³⁹ “The Folks Voluntarily Renounce FULRO-Dega Protestantism” (Bà con tự nguyện từ bỏ Fulro - tin lành Đêga), *Truyền hình Công an Nhân dân*, <http://www.antv.gov.vn/tin-tuc/xa-hoi/ba-con-tu-nguyen-tu-bo-fulro-tin-lanh-dega-2534.html>.

⁴⁰ Copies of such documents on file with Human Rights Watch.

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch, *Public Insecurity*, pp. 19-21, 63, 73.

⁴² “At War’ with Evil Ways” (‘Cuộc chiến’ với tà đạo), *PetroTimes*, March 24, 2015, <http://petrotimes.vn/news/vn/phong-su-dieu-tra/truyen-dai-ky/cuoc-chien-voi-ta-dao.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁴³ “Strengthening the Work of Ensuring Security and Order in the Gia Lai Province Region” (Tăng cường công tác đảm bảo an ninh, trật tự trên địa bàn tỉnh Gia Lai), *Báo Gia Lai*, April 27, 2014, <http://www.baogialai.com.vn/channel/8211/201404/tang-cuong-cong-tac-dam-bao-an-ninh-trat-tu-tren-dia-ban-tinh-gia-lai-2308952/> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁴⁴ “When the Party Promotes the Role of Leadership Cores” (Khi Đảng phát huy vai trò hạt nhân lãnh đạo), *Gia Lai TV*, http://gialaitv.vn/new/155_111278_khi-dang-phat-huy-vai-tro-hat-nhan-lanh-dao.aspx.

⁴⁵ “Strengthen the Struggle Against Illegal Border Crossing” (Tăng cường đấu tranh phòng-chống vượt biên trái phép), *Báo Gia Lai*, <http://www.baogialai.com.vn/channel/9702/201502/tang-cuong-dau-tranh-phong-chong-vuot-bien-trai-phiep-2367710/>.

army newspaper, in late September 2014 police in the Chu Puh district of Gia Lai arrested three Jarai named Rmah Blot, Ksor Hlip, and Kpa Chul, whom it described as local leaders of “peaceful evolution” efforts to “propagandize and entice national minorities ... to abandon traditional religious activities in order to follow ‘De Ga Protestantism,’” “sow division between *kinh* [ethnic Vietnamese] and Montagnards,” stir people up against the Communist Party and government, and “build bases for a so-called ‘De Ga Country.’”⁴⁶

At the same time, Vietnamese media cite statistics according to which, as of October 2014, 1,758 people in Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Kon Tum provinces were identified as participating in “evil way” religion in 10 different districts, with 39 “cores⁴⁷ in hiding,” and as continuing to gather to recite prayers in private homes.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ “Be Vigilant Against Games to Wreck the Policy of Great National Unity” (Cảnh giác với những chiêu trò phá hoại chính sách đại đoàn kết dân tộc), *Công an Kon Tum*, <http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/canh-giac-voi-nhung-chieu-tro-pha-hoai-chinh-sach-dai-doan-ket-dan-toc/327487.html>.

⁴⁷ A Vietnamese Communist term referring to junior but key political actors. In Communist Party parlance the term is used to refer to people who are considered potential candidate party members.

⁴⁸ “At War’ with Evil Ways” (‘Cuộc chiến’ với tà đạo), *PetroTimes*, <http://petrotimes.vn/news/vn/phong-su-dieu-tra/truyen-dai-ky/cuoc-chien-voi-ta-dao.html>.

III. Efforts by Vietnam and Cambodia to Stop Asylum Seekers

The Vietnamese border defense forces newspaper reported that Gia Lai authorities admitted that “almost 100” minority people had gone “absent without reasons” in 2014, including from Phu Thien, Chu Se, Chu Pu, Dac Doa, and Duc Co districts.⁴⁹ This appears related to what official Vietnamese sources report as an upsurge starting in November 2014 of crossings and attempted crossings into Cambodia by De Ga believers and other highlander minorities.⁵⁰

Vietnamese authorities concede that the main reasons for this include De Ga hopes of making their way to a place where they can “freely practice” their religion.⁵¹ Among those who crossed around November 2014 were some in a group of 13 Jarai who were helped to make their way from Ratanakiri province to Phnom Penh in late December by the Cambodia Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁵² The Cambodian government eventually recognized them as bona fide refugees having a well-founded fear of persecution in Vietnam.⁵³ Vietnamese media excoriated them as law-breakers for participating in De Ga religious activities. Vietnamese authorities lamented that by successfully fleeing to Cambodia with the help of nongovernmental organizations there, the 13 were able to avoid being “dealt with” by the Vietnamese government.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ “Strengthen the Blocking of Situations of Illegal Border Crossing into Cambodia” (Tăng cường ngăn chặn tình trạng vượt biên trái phép sang Cam-pu-chia), <http://www.bienphong.com.vn/tang-cuong-ngan-chan-tinh-trang-vuot-bien-trai-phép-sang-cam-pu-chia/29089.bbp>.

⁵⁰ “Strengthening the Struggle to Defend Against Persons Illegally Crossing the Border in the Western Highlands Region” (Tăng cường đấu tranh phòng, chống người vượt biên trái phép trên địa bàn Tây Nguyên), http://daklak.gov.vn/portal/page/portal/daklak/tuyen-truyen/bien-gioi-bien-dao?p_page_id=19161438&pers_id=&folder_id=8459244&item_id=19993539&p_details=1.

⁵¹ “The Ma Dot Story” (Chuyện của Ma Dốt), *Báo Phú Yên*, <http://www.baophuyen.com.vn/382/130770/chuyen-cua-ma-dot.html>.

⁵² Aun Pheap and George Wright, “In Ratanakiri, Montagnards Hiding, but Still Hopeful,” *Cambodia Daily*, November 28, 2014, <http://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/in-ratanakiri-montagnards-hiding-but-still-hopeful-73249/> (accessed November 30, 2014); Phak Seangly, “Montagnards in R’kiri vow to stay,” *Phnom Penh Post*, November 28, 2014, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/montagnards-r%E2%80%9999kiri-vow-stay> (accessed November 29, 2014). The first of this group entered Cambodia on October 30, 2014, with others following in November.

⁵³ “Cambodia: Register, Not Return, Vietnamese Asylum Seekers,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 1, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/01/cambodia-register-not-return-vietnamese-asylum-seekers>.

⁵⁴ “Strengthen the Blocking of Situations of Illegal Border Crossing into Cambodia” (Tăng cường ngăn chặn tình trạng vượt biên trái phép sang Cam-pu-chia), <http://www.bienphong.com.vn/tang-cuong-ngan-chan-tinh-trang-vuot-bien-trai-phép-sang-cam-pu-chia/29089.bbp>.

On January 16, 2015, Vietnamese Minister of Public Security Tran Dai Quang visited Phnom Penh and met with Cambodian Minister of Interior Sar Kheng, during which they signed a further set of agreements between the two governments. Among them were provisions on security force cooperation in border areas, including coordination “in struggle against objects wanted” in both countries who had “fled across to the other country for refuge.” The agreement was hailed by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.⁵⁵

In another apparent response to the rise in departures, Tran Dai Quang stated in a speech in Buon Ma Thuot on January 26, 2015, that the VPA Border Defense Force headquarters in Hanoi had “increased its forces and coordinated with our relevant forces and Cambodian ones to carry out methods to ... arrest objects” who had reached Cambodia.⁵⁶

In a similar measure, the Gia Lai province administration, on the suggestion of the Province Military Command, established commune-level permanent militia units under special commune military commands in every border commune to help other security forces seal the frontier and suppress De Ga proselytizing.⁵⁷ Criminal case files were created to “sort out” some of those who try but fail to cross into Cambodia.⁵⁸ One Vietnamese media account reported that in February 2015 border patrol forces arrested two De Ga believers trying to take others into Cambodia from Ia Grai district of Gia Lai province. A criminal prosecution was then initiated.⁵⁹ This is part of a pattern: people accused of organizing departures are subjected to public denunciation, arrest, and prosecution.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ “Minister of Public Security Tran Dai Quang Visited and Worked with Cambodia” (Bộ trưởng Công an Trần Đại Quang thăm và làm việc tại Campuchia), *TTXVN/Vietnam*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.vietnamplus.vn/bo-truong-cong-an-tran-dai-quang-tham-va-lam-viec-tai-campuchia/302587.vnp> (accessed January 19, 2015).

⁵⁶ “The Western Highlands Steering Committee Initiates 2015 Work Duties” (Ban Chỉ đạo Tây Nguyên triển khai nhiệm vụ công tác năm 2015), http://www.mps.gov.vn/html/portlet/vcmsviewcontent/print_article.jsp?articleId=31960&isEnglish=false (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁵⁷ “Peace Relies on a Standing Militia” (Bình yên nhờ dân quân thường trực), *Quân đội nhân dân*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/quan-su-quoc-phong/binh-yen-nho-dan-quan-thuong-truc/352181.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁵⁸ “Making a Commitment to the Village” (Nhận lời với buôn làng), *Báo Công an nhân dân*, February 3, 2015, http://www.cadn.com.vn/news/75_127298_nha-n-lo-i-vo-i-buon-la-ng.aspx (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁵⁹ “Strengthen the Blocking of Illegal Border Crossings in the Western Highlands” (Tăng cường ngăn chặn vượt biên trái phép ở Tây Nguyên), <http://www.bienphong.com.vn/tang-cuong-ngan-chan-vuot-bien-trai-phep-o-tay-nguyen/30468.bbp>.

⁶⁰ Ibid. See also Arrest of Objects Facilitating Flight of Persons Abroad”, *Bắt giam đối tượng đưa người trốn ra nước ngoài*, *Báo Công an nhân dân*, August 30, 2014, http://cadn.com.vn/news/61_119516_ba-t-giam-do-i-tuo-ng-dua-nguo-i-tro-n-ra-nuo-c-ngoai-i.aspx (accessed April 19, 2015).

Other accounts stress that members of national minorities attempting to cross into Cambodia are liable to get lost in the jungle on the Vietnamese side, where they suffer from hunger and thirst, and some simply disappear, with their relatives left not knowing whether they are alive or dead.⁶¹

In November 2014 meetings on suppressing illegal border crossings were held between the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security and the Cambodian Ministry of Interior;⁶² Vietnamese immigration officials and Cambodia's Supreme Director for Immigration, Police General Sok Phal;⁶³ and VPA Border Defense Forces and Cambodian provincial army units.⁶⁴ Western Highland Vietnamese authorities requested that their Cambodian counterparts capture Montagnards who reached Cambodia and return them to Vietnam.⁶⁵ In January 2015, Cambodian officials in Ratanakiri province launched sustained and intensive searches for asylum seekers in the area's jungles.⁶⁶ Those found were summarily deported to Vietnam in January 2015. By the beginning of June 2015, Cambodia had sent

⁶¹ "Making a Commitment to the Village" (Nhận lời với buôn làng), *Báo Công an nhân dân*, http://www.cadn.com.vn/news/75_127298_nha-n-lo-i-vo-i-buon-la-ng.aspx.

⁶² "Cambodia-Vietnam Police Coordinate Pursuit and Arrest of Wanted Objects" (Cảnh sát Campuchia - Việt Nam: Phối hợp truy bắt các đối tượng truy nã), November 18, 2014, <http://www.congan.com.vn/?catid=708&id=528971&mod=detnews&p=> (accessed November 20, 2014).

⁶³ "Vietnam Border Force and the Cambodia Immigration General Department" (BĐBP Việt Nam và Tổng cục Di trú Cam-pu-chia), November 24, 2014, <http://bienphong.com.vn/baobienphong/news/tiep-tuc-tang-cuong-phoi-hop-kiem-soat-xnc-o-cua-khau/28391.bbp> (accessed November 26, 2014).

⁶⁴ "Dak Lak Border Force Holds Discussions with the Monduliri Province Military Sub-Region, Cambodia" (BĐBP Đắk Lắk hội đàm với Tiểu khu quân sự tỉnh Mun-đun-ki-ri, Cam-pu-chia), December 18, 2014, <http://bienphong.com.vn/baobienphong/news/bdbp-dak-lak-hoi-dam-voi-tieu-khu-quan-su-tinh-mun-dun-ki-ri-cam-pu-chia/28863.bbp> (accessed December 20, 2014); "Dak Lak Border Force: A Year with Much New" (BĐBP Đắk Lắk - Một năm với nhiều cái mới), December 29, 2014, <http://www.bienphong.com.vn/bdbp-dak-lak-mot-nam-voi-nhieu-cai-moi/29064.bbp> (accessed December 30, 2014).

⁶⁵ "Strengthen the Blocking of Illegal Border Crossings in the Western Highlands" (Tăng cường ngăn chặn vượt biên trái phép ở Tây Nguyên), <http://www.bienphong.com.vn/tang-cuong-ngan-chan-vuot-bien-trai-phep-o-tay-nguyen/30468.bbp>.

⁶⁶ Aun Pheap, "Montagnards Still in Hiding; Authorities Remain Silent," *Cambodia Daily*, January 6, 2015, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/montagnards-still-in-hiding-authorities-remain-silent-75387/> (accessed January 7, 2015); Khuon Narim, "Police Resume Search for Five Montagnards in Ratanakiri," *Cambodia Daily*, January 10, 2015, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/police-resume-search-for-five-montagnards-in-ratanakiri-75793/> (accessed January 11, 2015); Phak Seangly and Alice Cuddy, "Ratanakiri's Jarais feeling harassed," *Phnom Penh Post*, January 12, 2015, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/ratanakiris-jarais-feeling-harassed> (accessed January 13, 2015); Aun Pheap and Chris Mueller, "UN Says Ratanakiri Governor Unhelpful Over Montagnards," *Cambodia Daily*, January 16, 2015, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/un-says-ratanakiri-governor-unhelpful-over-montagnards-76256/> (accessed January 17, 2015); Aun Pheap, "Police Deport 7 Montagnards From Ratanakiri to Vietnam," *Cambodia Daily*, January 26, 2015, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/police-deport-7-montagnards-from-ratanakiri-to-vietnam-76656/> (accessed January 27, 2015).

back at least 54 Montagnards without allowing any opportunity to seek refugee status, and had denied at least another 109 the possibility of registering there as asylum seekers.⁶⁷

According to border defense force media, the chairman of the People's Committee of Ia Mor commune of Chu Prong district in Gia Lai reported on one refoulement of 42 “objects” in February 2015.⁶⁸ At a meeting on April 9, 2015 in Cambodia's Monduliri province between local police and Vietnamese police from Dak Lak province, the two security forces discussed their cooperation over the preceding nine months and into the future, including information-sharing and coordinated patrolling to prevent minority people from illegally fleeing Vietnam for Cambodia at the urging of “scoundrels.”⁶⁹

In late April 2015 the Cambodian government deployed almost 1,000 additional security forces to the Ratanakiri-Gia Lai/Dak Lak border with the primary mission of preventing asylum seekers from entering Cambodia.⁷⁰ On May 15, the governor of Ratanakiri, Thang Savun, who controls security forces in his province,⁷¹ met in Buon Me Thuot with Vietnam's Steering Committee for the Western Highlands to discuss strengthening the coordination of efforts against “hostile and reactionary forces” in border areas.⁷²

⁶⁷ “Cambodia: Register, Not Return, Vietnamese Asylum Seekers,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 1, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/01/cambodia-register-not-return-vietnamese-asylum-seekers>; Alice Cuddy and Phak Seangly, “Montagnard numbers swell in Phnom Penh,” Phnom Penh Post, June 9, 2015, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/montagnard-numbers-swell-phnom-penh> (accessed June 10, 2015).

⁶⁸ “Strengthen the Blocking of Illegal Border Crossings in the Western Highlands” (Tăng cường ngăn chặn vượt biên trái phép ở Tây Nguyên), <http://www.bienphong.com.vn/tang-cuong-ngan-chan-vuot-bien-trai-phep-o-tay-nguyen/30468.bbp>.

⁶⁹ “Police of the Two Provinces of Monduliri and Dak Lak Work Exchange on Security and Order Coordination” (Công an hai tỉnh Monduliri và Đắk Lắk giao ban công tác phối hợp an ninh trật tự), *Báo Kinh tế nông thôn*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.kinhnongthong.com.vn/Cong-an-hai-tinh-Mon-Dul-Ki-Ri-va-Dak-Lak-giao-ban-cong-tac-phoi-hop-an-ninh-trat-tu-140-51809.html> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁷⁰ Alice Cuddy and Phak Seangly, “Soldiers say main mission is stopping refugees,” *Phnom Penh Post*, May 1, 2015, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/soldiers-say-main-mission-stopping-refugees> (accessed May 2, 2015).

⁷¹ “Cambodia: Party Extends Control of Security Forces” Human Rights Watch news release, February 4, 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/04/cambodia-party-extends-control-security-forces>.

⁷² “Western Highlands Steering Committee Works with Ratanakiri Province Working Group” (Ban Chỉ đạo Tây Nguyên làm việc với đoàn công tác tỉnh Ratanakiri), *Đại đoàn kết*, May 16, 2015, <http://daidoanket.vn/index.aspx?chitiet=106400&menu=1371&style=1> (accessed May 17, 2015).

IV. Recommendations

To the Government of Vietnam

- Allow all independent religious organizations to freely conduct religious activities and govern themselves. Churches and denominations that do not choose to join one of the officially authorized religious organizations with government-appointed boards should be allowed to operate independently.
- End harassment, arrests, prosecutions, imprisonment, and ill-treatment of people because they are followers of so-called “evil way” religions, and release anyone currently being held for peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of religion, belief, and association.
- Cease all measures to prevent Montagnards and other Vietnamese citizens from leaving the country and do not punish those who return.
- Ensure all domestic legislation addressing religious affairs is brought into conformity with international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Amend provisions in domestic law that impinge on freedom of religion and belief, expression, association, or peaceful assembly in violation of the ICCPR.
- Investigate and appropriately discipline or prosecute members of the police or other authorities responsible for torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Permit outside observers, including United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations concerned with human rights, and foreign diplomats, unhindered and unaccompanied access to the Central Highlands, including specifically to communes and villages from which Montagnards have recently departed to seek asylum abroad. Ensure there is no retribution or retaliation whatsoever against anyone who speaks to or otherwise communicates with such outside observers.

To the Government of Cambodia

- Abide by the international legal prohibition on returning refugees and asylum seekers to a place where their lives or freedom would be threatened—the principle of nonrefoulement—to which Cambodia is bound as a party to the Refugee Convention.

- Ensure all Montagnards and other asylum seekers from Vietnam have the opportunity to lodge refugee claims and receive a fair determination of their claims for protection.
- Invite the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assist in the registration of asylum seekers, the determination of claims for refugee status, the reception and care of asylum seekers and refugees, and the promotion and facilitation of durable solutions on their behalf, including third-country resettlement.

To the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

- Seek from the Cambodian government full access to Montagnards who are apprehended in the border region with Vietnam and seek to ensure that they are provided their right to seek asylum.
- Should the Cambodian government fail to honor its obligations under the Refugee Convention, exercise UNHCR's mandate to conduct refugee status determinations for asylum seekers in Cambodia and to protect all people of concern to UNHCR from refoulement.
- In the exercise of UNHCR's protection mandate, ensure that there will be no cessation of the refugee status of any recognized Montagnard refugee in Cambodia until there has been an assessment of fundamental, stable, and enduring changes in the circumstances in Vietnam which caused the refugees to flee that makes use of appropriate information from UN specialized bodies, particularly UNHCR; and ensure that they will be able to return to their homes in safety and dignity.
- Seek from the Vietnamese government unfettered and unaccompanied access to the Central Highlands of Vietnam to assess the treatment of Montagnards who have been forcibly returned from Cambodia and to facilitate their departure from Vietnam if they still wish to seek asylum outside Vietnam.

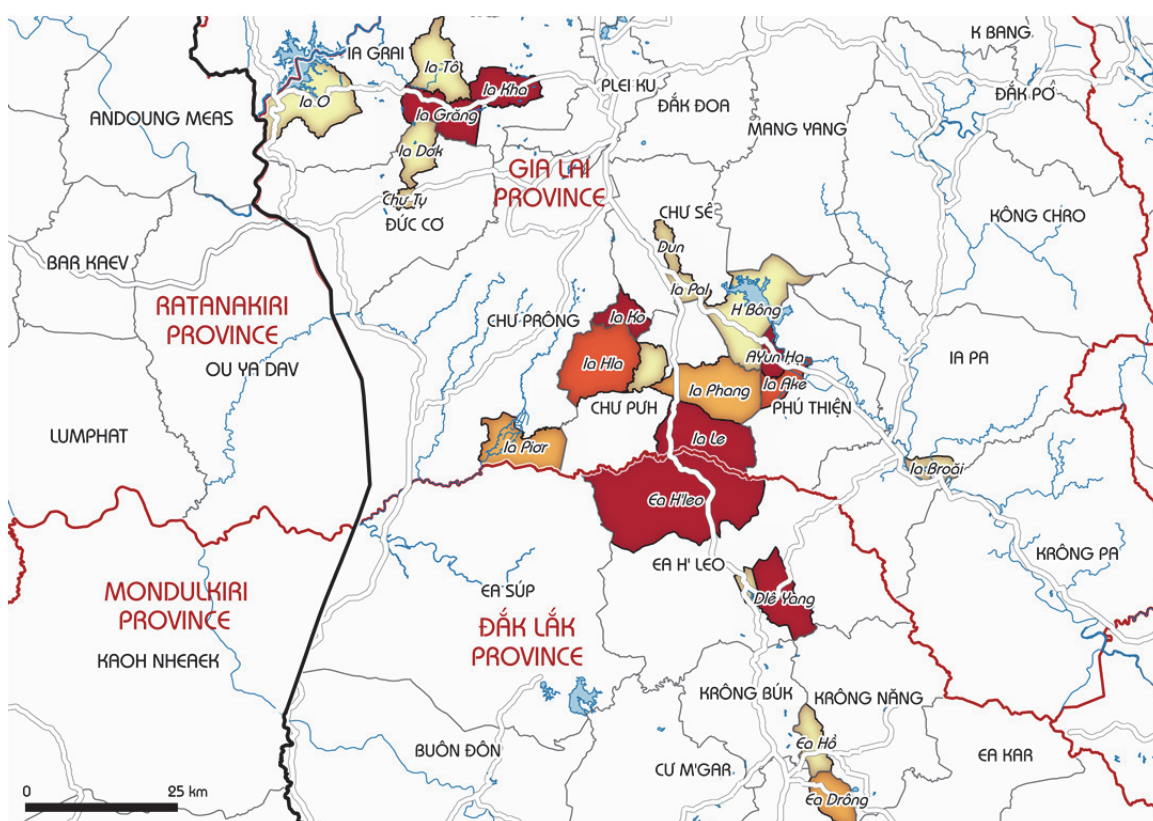
To the International Donor Community and Foreign Governments

- Send diplomats to ascertain the human rights situation in the Central Highlands, particularly with regards to freedom of religion and belief.
- Should Vietnam continue to violate the right to freedom of religion and belief in the Central Highlands and elsewhere in Vietnam, impose proportionate, targeted sanctions tied to clear benchmarks until the situation improves.

To the Government of the United States

- Press Vietnam to substantially revise its draft law on religion to make registration of religious congregations optional, or ensure that congregations opting not to register may still operate legally.
- Increase the frequency and visibility of diplomatic visits to the Central Highlands and other remote areas where there are frequent rights abuses.
- Downgrade Vietnam's status in the State Department's annual International Religious Freedom report, and designate Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern," citing its ongoing violations of religious freedom and more recent crackdowns in highland areas.
- Congress should impose new restrictions on US military interaction with Vietnam requiring that Vietnam make substantial progress on improving religious liberty before the restrictions are lifted, including:
 - abolishing registration requirements for religious congregations and restrictions on gatherings of religious groups not registered with the government;
 - prohibiting the practice of forced recantations of faith; and
 - ending police surveillance and harassment of religious leaders and members.
- Unless Vietnam makes substantial progress on human rights and in particular on religious liberty, the US Congress should pass a resolution stating that it will not ratify or pass implementing legislation for the Trans-Pacific Partnership or other economic or trade agreements to which Vietnam is a party.
- Members of Congress should individually communicate to the Vietnamese government their concerns about religious liberty in Vietnam and, where applicable, their intention to vote against ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership if Vietnam does not achieve substantial progress improving respect for human rights and religious liberty in particular.

Appendix: Communes of Origin of Montagnard Asylum Seekers Known to Have Left the Central Highlands for Cambodia or Thailand in 2014-2015



Darker hues indicate larger numbers of departures.⁷³

⁷³ Data compiled by HRW based on interviews of asylum seekers in Cambodia and Thailand.

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PERSECUTING “EVIL WAY” RELIGION

Abuses against Montagnards in Vietnam

Vietnamese government-controlled media and interviews with members of ethnic minorities who have fled to Cambodia and Thailand from the Central Highlands of Vietnam reveal ongoing government religious and political persecution. People accused of religious “evil ways” and political “autonomous thoughts” have been subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and mistreatment in custody. These violations of rights are part of a larger pattern of religious persecution in Vietnam in which the authorities monitor, harass, and sometimes violently crack down on religious groups that operate outside official and government-controlled religious institutions.

In *Persecuting “Evil Way” Religion: Abuses against Montagnards in Vietnam*, members of the Jarai and other Montagnard ethnic minorities from Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces described to Human Rights Watch how they were detained by commune or district police and other authorities for questioning about their religious and political activities, as well as possible plans to flee Vietnam. Detention periods lasted up to several months. They also told Human Rights Watch of being kept under constant surveillance in their villages by the authorities and instructed not to believe in forms of Christianity not approved by the government, to reject notions of ethnic minority political autonomy, and to give up hopes of gaining refuge abroad. Some alleged that police ill-treated them during interrogation. Human Rights Watch uncovered official media reports that describe the security forces as taking action against minority “peaceful evolution” activists protesting against shortcomings in Communist Party policies related to “national minorities.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Vietnamese government to cease its persecution of the Montagnards. It asks donors and other governments to urgently heighten international scrutiny of the situation to press the Vietnamese government to finally end religious persecution.



An elderly Montagnard woman sits at the door of a “house church” in Kret Krot village in Vietnam’s Central Highlands on September 26, 2013.

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