



Vietnam

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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Both the Constitution and government decrees provide for freedom of worship; however, the Government continued to restrict significantly those publicly organized activities of religious groups that were not recognized by the Government, or that it declared to be at variance with state laws and policies. Although some nonrecognized groups faced relatively few restrictions in practice, their status remained technically illegal. The Government generally allowed persons to practice individual worship in the religion of their choice, and participation in religious activities throughout the country continued to grow significantly; however, strict restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of religious groups remained in place. The Government maintained supervisory control of the recognized religions, in part because the Communist Party (CPV) fears that not only organized religion but any organized group outside its control or supervision may weaken its authority and influence by serving as political, social, and spiritual alternatives to the authority of the Government.

Respect for religious freedom remained fundamentally unchanged; while it slightly improved in practice for many practitioners, it remained poor or even deteriorated for some groups, notably ethnic minority Protestants and some independent Buddhists. In 2003, the CPV and Government moved more formally to recognize and support more fully the role of "legal" religious activity in society. At the same time, the CPV cited the overriding importance of "national unity" to assert more explicitly its control over religious groups. Official government recognition is required for all religious groups (as well as for social organizations) to operate legally; those without official status, especially certain sects and denominations of Buddhists, Protestants, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai, operated illegally. Oversight of recognized religions and harassment or repression of followers of nonrecognized religions varied from locality to locality, often as a result of varying local interpretations of national policy. These restrictions were particularly stringent in the Central and Northwest Highlands during the period covered by this report, although the numbers of religious believers in those locations nonetheless continued to grow. Religious groups faced restrictions on training and ordaining clergy, and on conducting educational and humanitarian activities. Religious figures encountered the greatest restrictions when they engaged in activities that the CPV perceived as political activism or a challenge to its rule. In December 2003, the Government issued a decree that called for the "normalization" of activities of the Southern Evangelical Church in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc Province, including the continued registration of new churches, but actual implementation at the local level remained unclear and the number of legal churches in the region remained very low. Most of the several hundred Protestant house churches in the region that had been ordered to shut down in 2001 remained officially closed and unrecognized. There have been credible reports for several years that officials have continued to pressure many ethnic minority Protestants to recant their faith, usually unsuccessfully. According to credible reports, the police arbitrarily detained and sometimes beat religious believers, particularly in the mountainous ethnic minority areas. During the period covered by this report, one Protestant leader in the Northwest Highlands reportedly was beaten to death for refusing to recant his faith. Another Protestant leader reportedly was beaten to death in 2002. The Government specifically denied these allegations.

On April 10, ethnic minority protests took place in the Central Highlands. Several foreign organizations alleged that the protests were largely sparked by lack of religious freedom. Many Protestant and Catholic leaders in the Central Highlands claimed the reasons were more complicated, but they acknowledged that restrictions on religion added to an already volatile situation caused by land disputes, local corruption, and historical discrimination in education and employment. Credible reports as well as government accusations pointed to mobilization of the demonstrations by overseas groups with political or separatist agendas. Religious practice and observance generally was less restricted in other parts of the country.

In October 2003, authorities detained many of the leaders of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) after they held an organizational meeting without government permission in Binh Dinh Province. Among

the persons detained were several who had been freed from detention a few months earlier. Four of the UBCV's leading members subsequently were sentenced to "administrative detention" without trial, while others, including Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and deputy leader Thich Quang Do, remained under conditions resembling house arrest at their pagodas without officially being charged or sentenced. However, they were able to receive some visitors and conduct some religious activities and training, as evidenced by several large celebrations in honor of the Buddha's birthday at some UBCV pagodas on June 1; however, they were restricted from leaving their pagodas. The estimated number of prisoners and detainees held for religious reasons was at least 45, with a minimum of 11 more held in conditions resembling house arrest.

The relationship among religions in society generally is amicable. In various parts of the country, there were modest levels of cooperation and dialogue between Catholics and Protestants, Catholics and Cao Dai, Buddhists and Hoa Hao, and Buddhists and Cao Dai. Religious figures from most major recognized religions participated in official bodies such as the Vietnam Fatherland Front and the National Assembly.

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) maintained an active and regular dialogue with senior and working-level government officials to advocate greater religious freedom. The U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. officials, including the Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, raised concerns about the repression of Protestantism in the Central and Northwest Highlands, detention and arrest of religious figures, and other restrictions on religious freedom with government cabinet ministers up to the level of Deputy Prime Minister, CPV leaders, provincial officials, and others. Intervention by the U.S. Government may have prompted the Government to moderate treatment of some ethnic minority Protestants in some Central Highlands provinces, as well as to promote some liberalization of government treatment of other religions. In September 2004, the Secretary of State designated Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 127,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 80 million. The Government officially recognizes one Buddhist organization (Buddhists make up approximately 50 percent of the population), the Roman Catholic Church (8 to 10 percent of the population), several Cao Dai organizations (1.5 to 3 percent of the population), one Hoa Hao organization (1.5 to 4 percent of the population), two Protestant organizations (.5 to 2 percent of the population), and one Muslim organization (0.1 percent of the population). Many believers belong to organizations that are not officially recognized by the Government. Most other Vietnamese citizens consider themselves nonreligious.

Among the country's religious communities, Buddhism is the dominant religious belief. Many Buddhists practice an amalgam of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucian traditions that sometimes is called the country's "triple religion." Some estimates suggest that more than half of the population is at least nominally Buddhist. Buddhists typically visit pagodas on festival days and have a worldview that is shaped in part by Buddhism, but in reality these beliefs often rely on a very expansive definition of the faith. Many individuals, especially among the ethnic majority Kinh, who may not consider themselves Buddhist, nonetheless follow traditional Confucian and Taoist practices and often visit Buddhist temples. One prominent Buddhist official has estimated that approximately 30 percent of Buddhists are devout and practice their faith regularly. The Office of Religious Affairs uses a much lower estimate of 11 percent (9 million) practicing Buddhists. Mahayana Buddhists, most of whom are part of the ethnic Kinh majority, are found throughout the country, especially in the populous areas of the northern and southern delta regions. There are fewer Buddhists, proportionately, in certain highland areas, although migration of Kinh to highland areas is changing the distribution somewhat. Mahayana Buddhist monks in the country historically have engaged on occasion in political and social issues, most notably during the 1960s, when some monks campaigned for peace and against perceived injustices in the former Republic of Vietnam. A Khmer ethnic minority in the south practices Theravada Buddhism. Numbering just over 1 million persons, they live almost exclusively in the Mekong Delta.

There are an estimated 6 to 8 million Roman Catholics in the country, although official government statistics put the number at 5,300,000. French missionaries introduced the religion in the 17th century. In the 1940s, priests in the large Catholic dioceses of Phat Diem and Bui Chu, to the southeast of Hanoi, organized a political association with a militia that fought against the Communist guerrillas until defeated in 1954. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics from the northern part of the country fled to Saigon and the surrounding areas ahead of the 1954 partition of North and South. Catholics live throughout the country, but the largest concentrations remain in the southern provinces around HCMC and in the provinces southeast of Hanoi. Catholicism has

revived in many areas, with newly rebuilt or renovated churches in recent years and growing numbers of persons who want to be religious workers. The proportion of Catholics in the population of some provinces appears to be increasing modestly. Long-vacant bishoprics have been filled by the Vatican, with government approval, in the past several years, and in 2003 a new Vietnamese cardinal was named by the Vatican, apparently with government agreement but not prior approval. However, the Government continues to control and restrict the numbers of seminarians and screen all candidates upon application and graduation.

Estimates of the number of Protestants in the country range from the official government figure of 421,000 to claims by churches of 1,600,000 or more. Protestantism in the country dates from 1911, when a Canadian evangelist from the Christian and Missionary Alliance arrived in Da Nang. There are estimates that the growth of Protestant believers has been as much as 600 percent over the past decade, despite continued government restrictions on proselytizing activities. Many of these persons belong to unregistered evangelical house churches primarily in rural villages and ethnic minority areas. Based on believers' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including Hmong, Thai, and other ethnic minorities (an estimated 200,000 followers) in the Northwest Highlands, and some 350,000 members of ethnic minority groups of the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, Bahnar, and Koho, among others). The house church movement in the Northwest was sparked in part by Hmong language radio broadcasts from the Philippines beginning in the late 1980s. In more recent years, missionaries, mostly ethnic Hmong, have increased evangelism in the area.

The Cao Dai religion was founded in 1926 in the southern part of the country. Official government statistics put the number of Cao Dai at 2.2 million, although Cao Dai officials routinely claim as many as 4 million adherents. Cao Dai groups are most active in Tay Ninh Province, where the Cao Dai "Holy See" is located, and in HCMC and the Mekong Delta. There are 13 separate groups within the Cao Dai religion; the largest is the Tay Ninh sect, which represents more than half of all Cao Dai believers. The Cao Dai religion is syncretistic, combining elements of many faiths. Its basic belief system is influenced strongly by Mahayana Buddhism, although it recognizes a diverse array of persons who have conveyed divine revelation, including Siddhartha, Jesus, Lao-Tse, Confucius, and Moses. During the 1940s and 1950s, the Cao Dai participated in political and military activities. Their opposition to the Communist forces until 1975 was a factor in repression after 1975. A small Cao Dai organization, the Thien Tien branch, was formally recognized in 1995. The Tay Ninh Cao Dai branch was granted legal recognition in 1997.

The Hoa Hao branch of Buddhism was founded in the southern part of the country in 1939. Hoa Hao is largely a quietist faith, emphasizing private acts of worship and devotion; it does not have a priesthood and rejects many of the ceremonial aspects of mainstream Buddhism. According to the Office of Religious Affairs, there are 1.3 million Hoa Hao followers; affiliated expatriate groups estimate that there may be up to 3 million followers. Hoa Hao followers are concentrated in the Mekong Delta, particularly in provinces such as An Giang, where the Hoa Hao were dominant as a political and military as well as a religious force before 1975. Elements of the Hoa Hao were among the last to surrender to Communist forces in the Mekong Delta in the summer of 1975. The government-recognized Hoa Hao Administrative Committee was organized in 1999.

Mosques serving the country's small Muslim population, estimated at 65,000 persons, operate in western An Giang Province, HCMC, Hanoi, and provinces in the southern coastal part of the country. The Muslim community is composed mainly of ethnic Cham, although in HCMC and An Giang Province it includes some ethnic Vietnamese and migrants originally from Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Approximately half of the Muslims in the country practice Sunni Islam. Sunni Muslims are concentrated in five locations around the country. An estimated 15,000 live in Tan Chau district of western An Giang Province, which borders Cambodia. Nearly 3,000 live in western Tay Ninh Province, which also borders Cambodia. More than 5,000 Muslims reside in HCMC, with 2,000 residing in neighboring Dong Nai Province. Another 5,000 live in the south central coastal provinces of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan. Approximately 50 percent of Muslims practice Bani Islam, a type of Islam unique to the ethnic Cham who live on the central coast of the country. Bani clerics fast during Ramadan; ordinary Bani followers do not. The Bani Koran is an abridged version of approximately 20 pages, written in the Cham language. The Bani also continue to participate in certain traditional Cham festivals, which include prayers to Hindu gods and traditional Cham "mother goddesses." Both groups of Muslims appear to be on cordial terms with the Government and are able to practice their faith freely. They have limited contact with Muslims in foreign countries, such as Malaysia.

There are several smaller religious communities not recognized by the Government, 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. Another 4,000 Hindus live in HCMC; some are ethnic Cham but most are Indian or of mixed

Indian-Vietnamese descent.

There are an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 members of the Baha'i Faith, largely concentrated in the south, a number of whom are foreign-born. Prior to 1975, there were an estimated 200,000 believers, according to Baha'i officials. Some Baha'i members in HCMC were allowed to hold a quiet ceremony to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Baha'i faith in the country on May 22.

There are several hundred members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) who are spread throughout the country but live primarily in HCMC and Hanoi. Some are pre-1975 converts, while others became Mormons while living in Cambodia.

At least 10 active but unofficially unrecognized congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses, with several hundred members, are present in the country. Most of the congregations are in the south, with five in HCMC.

Of the country's approximately 80 million citizens, 14 million or more reportedly do not practice any organized religion. Some sources strictly define those considered to be practicing Buddhists, excluding those whose activities are limited to visiting pagodas on ceremonial holidays. Using this definition, the number of nonreligious persons would be much higher, perhaps as high as 50 million. No statistics are available on the level of participation in formal religious services, but it generally is acknowledged that this number has continued to increase from the early 1990s.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14 percent of the overall population. The minorities historically have practiced sets of traditional beliefs different from those of the ethnic majority Kinh. Except for the Khmer and the Cham, most minorities are more likely to be Protestant than the majority Kinh, although many ethnic minority Protestants continue to observe some traditional animist practices.

Several dozen foreign missionary groups throughout the country are engaged in developmental, humanitarian, educational, and relief efforts. These organizations legally are registered as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) providing humanitarian assistance. Foreign missionaries legally are not permitted to proselytize or perform religious activities. To work in the country, they must be registered with the Government as an international NGO. Undeclared missionaries from several countries are active in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, government decrees, and a January 2003 CPV Central Committee resolution on religion provide for freedom of belief and worship as well as of nonbelief; however, the Government continued to restrict significantly those organized activities of religious groups that it regarded to be at variance with state laws and policies or a challenge to Party authority. The Government generally allowed persons to practice individual worship freely and to participate in public worship under the leadership of any of the major recognized religions. In some localities, authorities also tacitly allowed many members of unregistered religious groups to practice their faith freely. Participation in religious activities throughout the country continued to grow significantly. However, the Government continued its close oversight and control over religious hierarchies, organized religious activities, and other activities of religious groups. While the Office on Religious Affairs supervises recognized religious bodies and is tasked with protecting their rights, in practice there are few effective legal remedies for violations of religious freedom committed by government officials.

The constitutional right of freedom of belief and religion is interpreted and enforced unevenly. In some areas, local officials allow relatively wide latitude to believers; in other provinces in the north, the Northwest Highlands, the Central Highlands, and the central coast, religious members of nonrecognized entities sometimes undergo significant harassment or repression and are subject to the whims and prejudices of local officials in their respective jurisdictions. This particularly was true for Protestants in highland areas, many of whose requests for affiliation with one of the two recognized Protestant organizations have not been approved by the Government.

There are no known cases in recent years in which the courts acted to interpret laws to protect a person's right to religious freedom. National security and national solidarity provisions in the Constitution override guarantees of religious freedom, and these provisions reportedly have been used to impede religious gatherings and the spread of religion to certain ethnic groups. The penal code, as amended in 1997, established penalties for offenses that are defined only vaguely, including "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and nonbelievers." In some cases, particularly involving Hmong and Montagnard

Protestants and Hoa Hao adherents, when authorities charged persons with practicing religion illegally, they used Article 258 of the Penal Code that allowed for jail terms of up to 3 years for "abus[ing] the rights to freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of belief, religion, assembly, association and other democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State."

A 1997 directive on administrative probation gives national and local security officials broad powers to detain and monitor citizens and control where they live and work for up to 2 years if they are believed to be threatening "national security." In their implementation of administrative probation, some local authorities held persons under conditions resembling house arrest. The authorities use administrative probation as a means of controlling persons whom they believe hold independent and potentially subversive opinions. Some local authorities cite "abuse of religious freedom" as a reason to impose administrative probation. Two-year administrative probation terms were placed on four UBCV leaders during the period covered by this report.

The Government does not favor a particular religion, and virtually all senior government and CPV officials as well as the vast majority of National Assembly delegates are formally "without religion," although many openly practice traditional ancestor worship and Buddhism. The prominent traditional position of Buddhism does not affect religious freedom for others adversely, including those who wish not to practice a religion. The Constitution expressly protects the right of "nonbelief" as well as "belief."

The Government requires religious and other groups to register and uses this process to monitor and control religious organizations, as it does with all social organizations. The Government officially recognizes Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Muslim religious organizations. Individual congregations within each of these religious groups must be registered as well. Some leaders of Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai organizations and many believers of these religions do not recognize or participate in the government-approved associations. Some, especially Protestant denominations, have requested official recognition of their own independent organizations, so far unsuccessfully. Their activities, and those of the unregistered Protestant house churches, are considered illegal by the authorities, and members of these groups sometimes experience harassment or repression as a result. Other Protestant house churches are seeking affiliation with one of the two existing recognized organizations. Under the law, only those activities and organizations expressly sanctioned by the Government are deemed to be legal. To obtain official recognition, a group must obtain government approval of its leadership, its structure, and the overall scope of its activities. Recognized religious groups in principle are allowed to open, operate, and refurbish places of worship, train religious leaders, and obtain permission for the publication of materials.

Officially recognized religious organizations are able to operate openly in most parts of the country, and followers of these religions are able to worship without harassment. Officially recognized organizations must consult with the Government about their operations, including leadership selection, although not about their basic articles of faith. While the Government does not directly appoint the leadership of the official religious organizations, to varying degrees it plays an influential role in shaping the process of selection and must approve investitures of religious titles. The Government's influence varies by level of the title, religion, and local authority. For example, the power to approve a religious office holder below the provincial level lies with the provincial authorities. Higher-level officials receive much closer scrutiny. Decree 26 from 1999 explicitly gives the Government the power to approve all holders of religious offices; the Government effectively, but not explicitly, has veto power. In general, religious bodies are confined to dealing specifically with spiritual and organizational matters and are restricted in the other activities, such as charitable programs, that they can conduct.

On June 18, the National Assembly's Standing Committee passed an Ordinance on Belief and Religion, which will take effect in November. The ordinance reiterates citizens' right to freedom of belief, religion, and freedom not to follow a religion, and it states that violation of these freedoms is prohibited. It advises, however, that "abuse" of freedom of belief or religion "to undermine the country's peace, independence, and unity" is illegal and warns that religious activities must be suspended if they negatively affect the cultural traditions of the nation. The ordinance also reiterates the principle of government control and oversight of religious organizations, specifying that religious groups must be recognized by the Government and must seek approval from authorities for many activities, including the training of clergy, construction of religious facilities, preaching outside a specifically recognized facility, and evangelizing. Many activities, including promotion and transfer of clergy and annual activities of religious groups, appear to be held under the new ordinance to the lower standard of "registration" with the Government, rather than approval. The ordinance encourages religious organizations to engage in certain charitable activities.

Over the past several years, the Government has accorded much greater latitude to followers of recognized religious organizations, and the majority of the country's religious followers have continued to benefit from this development. The Government and CPV have held conferences to discuss and publicize religious decrees that reaffirm the right to believe but reiterate the need for all religious activities to be "legal," thus mandating government oversight. Nonetheless, the Office of Religious Affairs and the CPV's Mass Mobilization Commission have met with house church leaders from HCMC and the Central Highlands, as well as with leaders of other unrecognized religious groups.

Religious organizations must register their regular activities with the authorities annually. Religious organizations must in theory obtain permission to hold training seminars, conventions, and celebrations outside the regular religious calendar; to build or remodel places of worship; to engage in charitable activities or operate religious schools; and to train, ordain, promote, or transfer clergy. They also must obtain permission for large mass gatherings, as do nonreligious groups. Many of these restrictive powers lie principally with provincial or municipal people's committees, and local treatment of religious persons varies widely.

The degree of government oversight of church activities varied greatly among localities. In some areas, especially in the south, Catholic priests and nuns operated kindergartens, orphanages, vocational training centers, and clinics, and engaged in a variety of other humanitarian projects. In HCMC the Catholic Church is involved in running HIV/AIDS hospices and treatment centers, and providing counseling to young persons. Buddhist groups engaged in humanitarian activities, including counternarcotics programs, in many parts of the country. The Hoa Hao organization reported that it engaged in numerous charitable activities and local development projects. Foreign missionaries and religious organizations are not allowed to operate as such in the country. Some religiously affiliated international NGOs are registered with the Government to carry out humanitarian assistance. They may not engage in proselytizing. Catholic and Buddhist groups are allowed to provide religious education to children. Children also are taught religion and language at Khmer Buddhist pagodas and at mosques outside regular classroom hours.

In 2001, the Government recognized the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). The SECV has affiliated churches in all of the southern provinces of the country, but administrative boards in five provinces and HCMC remain not formally recognized. In February 2003, the SECV opened a government-sanctioned theological school in HCMC with 50 students. Since December 2003, 10 additional SECV congregations have been officially recognized in the Central Highlands.

The northern branch of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) has been recognized since 1963 and officially has 15 approved churches in the northern part of the country. The ECVN also has issued papers of affiliation to over 800 ethnic-minority house churches in the northern and northwestern parts of the country, although it has not formally applied for official recognition for any of these churches. The ECVN has not been allowed freely to hold a national convention since 1988. During much of the period covered by this report, the ECVN engaged in discussions with the Government about holding a new convention. Despite progress, these discussions ultimately stalled as a result of ongoing government restrictions.

Because of the lack of meaningful due process in the legal system, the actions of religious adherents are subject to the discretion of local officials in their respective jurisdictions. There are no significant punishments for government officials who do not follow laws protecting religious practice, although a new law provides channels for citizens to seek payments for miscarriages of justice. There are no known recent cases in which the courts acted to interpret laws to protect a person's right to religious freedom.

There are no specific religious national holidays.

The Office of Religious Affairs occasionally hosts meetings for leaders of diverse religious traditions to address religious matters, and during the period covered by this report it had training sessions on religious freedom and "normal" practices for officials in the Central Highlands. The local branch in HCMC also has hosted training on religion for local officials over the past few years, with assistance from local clergy.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to maintain broad legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom, although in many areas Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and the Government itself reported an increase in religious activity and observance. Operational and organizational restrictions on the hierarchies and

clergy of recognized religious groups remained in place. Religious groups frequently faced difficulties in obtaining teaching materials, expanding training facilities, publishing religious materials, and expanding the number of clergy in religious training in response to increased demand from congregations, although enforcement of these types of restrictions appears to have been easing gradually for several years.

The Government continued to ban and actively discourage participation in what it regards as illegal religious groups, including the UBCV and Protestant house churches, as well as the unapproved Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. The withholding of official recognition of religious bodies is one of the means by which the Government actively attempts to restrict some types of religious activities. Religious and organizational activities by UBCV monks are illegal. Many evangelical house churches do not attempt to register because they believe that their applications would be denied, or because they want to avoid any semblance of government control. Some recognized religious groups carry out underground religious activities that they do not report to the Government and have faced little or no harassment. Some nonrecognized Protestant groups also conduct religious services and training without noticeable restriction from the Government.

The Government requires all Buddhist monks to be approved by and work under the officially recognized Buddhist organization, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS). The Government influenced the selection of the leadership of the VBS, excluding many leaders and supporters of the pre-1975 UBCV organization. The number of Buddhist seminarians is controlled and limited by the Office of Religions Affairs, although the number of Buddhist academies at the local and provincial levels has increased in recent years in addition to several university-equivalent academies. Khmer Theravada Buddhists are allowed a somewhat separate identity within VBS. The Government continued to oppose efforts by the unrecognized UBCV to operate independently. In early October 2003, senior monks of the UBCV held an organizational meeting without government permission at a monastery in Binh Dinh Province. Subsequent to the meeting, four leading monks of the church--Thich Tue Sy, Thich Nguyen Ly, Thich Thanh Huyen, and Thich Dong Tho -- were detained and sentenced without trial to 2 years' "administrative detention" in their respective pagodas. Many other leading members, including Thich Vien Dinh, Thich Thien Hanh, Thich Nguyen Vuong, and Thich Thai Hoa, have been placed under conditions similar to house arrest, despite the lack of any charges against them. Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and deputy leader Thich Quang Do have been placed under similar, house arrest-like restrictions, although the Government does not appear to be investigating its allegations of "possession of state secrets" against them. Previously, restrictions on Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do had been lessened in early 2003, such as when Thich Huyen Quang traveled to Hanoi for medical treatment in March 2003 and met Prime Minister Phan Van Khai as well as the U.S. Ambassador. Thich Quang Do had been released from official administrative detention in June 2003.

During the period covered by this report, the Catholic Church hierarchy remained somewhat frustrated by government restrictions, but a number of clergy reported continued easing of government control over church activities in certain dioceses, including in a few churches in Hanoi and HCMC that offer English-language masses for expatriates. The Catholic Church continued to face many restrictions on the training and ordination of priests, nuns, and bishops. The Government effectively maintains veto power over Vatican appointments of bishops; however, in practice it has sought to cooperate with the Church in nominations for appointment. At least nine bishoprics have been filled by the Vatican, in coordination with the Government, over the past 5 years, along with the naming of one new cardinal. Government officials have stated publicly that they "view the Catholic Church as a positive force."

The Catholic Church operates 6 seminaries in the country with over 800 students enrolled, as well as a new special training program for "older" students. All students must be approved by local authorities, both for enrolling in seminary and again prior to their ordination as priests. The Government had approved a seventh seminary, but the provincial government where it was to be located blocked the seminary, allegedly on the grounds that the province had no office to oversee institutions of higher education. The Catholic Church is now attempting to establish the seminary in a different location. The Church believes that the number of students being ordained is insufficient to support the growing Catholic population and has indicated it would like to open additional seminaries and enroll new classes every year in at least some of its seminaries.

The ECVN has not held an annual meeting or elected new leadership since 1988, in part because of the Government's ongoing efforts to influence ECVN leadership and its refusal to recognize some ECVN clergy. In the spring of 2004, both sides made steps towards holding a new congress, with a hope of convening the general congress in 2004. The ECVN operated a theological school from 1988 to 1993; informal training of religious and lay leaders continues. The ECVN has issued papers of affiliation to 800 mostly ethnic minority

congregations since 2002, representing approximately 110,000 members located in the northern and northwestern highlands. However, the Government has not officially accepted these enrollments, and the congregations remain unrecognized.

In 2001, the Government ordered almost all unrecognized Protestant congregations and meeting points in the Central Highlands, reportedly numbering several hundred, to close. Provincial governments have now recognized and permitted 28 of these to reopen. In December 2003, the Committee on Religious Affairs in Hanoi issued a decree on the "normalization" of Protestantism in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc Province, ostensibly intended to expedite the registration of churches in the region, subject to government control and approval. The decree invited SECV congregations to register with local authorities and suggested the Church prepare study classes that could lead to the official recognition of house-church preachers. Ten of the 28 SECV congregations in the Central Highlands have been recognized since the issuance of the normalization decree. Some Protestant pastors in the Central Highlands remain suspicious of the SECV and reportedly do not plan to seek affiliation with it.

Many pastors of Protestant denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Baptists, and Assemblies of God (AOG) still do not wish to join the SECV because of doctrinal differences. The Government has held discussions about recognition and registration with leaders of at least four Protestant denominations, including Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists. In the past, the Government had reportedly attempted to repress the AOG and other unregistered denominations by causing members to lose their jobs, forbidding their children to attend school, or confiscating their property, but it no longer imprisons AOG believers or pastors. In at least some--primarily urban--areas, government harassment of Pentecostals diminished during the period covered by this report; however, some Mennonites reportedly faced harassment by government officials in some parts of the country during this same period.

Despite the small increase in the number of legal SECV churches in the Central Highlands, provincial authorities continued to restrict Protestant activities in the region, particularly among ethnic minorities, such as the Mnong, Ede, Jarai, and Bahnar. Protestant Christmas and Easter celebrations in the Central Highlands were allowed in most localities but prohibited in others. There is substantial networking among Protestant denominations in HCMC but less in the rest of the country. Underground churches from pre-1975 denominations generally were reported to have fewer restrictions than those established more recently.

There are no officially recognized Protestant churches in the Northwest Highlands, despite the estimated presence of over 100,000 believers in the region. Officials from Ha Giang, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien have specifically told U.S. diplomats that there were no Protestants at all in their respective provinces, despite acknowledgement by central government officials in Hanoi that numerous house churches and Protestant believers are present in the Northwest Highlands.

The Hoa Hao have faced some restrictions on their religious and political activities since 1975, in part because of their previous armed opposition to the Communist forces. After 1975 all administrative offices, places of worship, and social and cultural institutions connected to the Hoa Hao faith were closed. Believers continued to practice their religion at home but the lack of access to public gathering places contributed to the Hoa Hao community's isolation and fragmentation. In 1999, a new official Hoa Hao body, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council was formed. Several leaders of the Hoa Hao community, including several pre-1975 leaders, openly criticized the Council, claiming that it was subservient to the Government, and demanded official recognition instead of their own Hoa Hao body, the Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC). The Government turned down a group that subsequently tried to register the independent Hoa Hao organization. Some members of this group were incarcerated and remained in custody at the end of the period covered by this report. The Government continued to restrict the number of clergy that the Hoa Hao can train. On June 8-9, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council held its second congress, attended by 500 representatives from around the country. At the conference, the council approved a new charter to replace the regulations under which the council formerly operated and elected a new 21-member Executive Board in place of the old 11-member Representative Board.

The Government never dissolved the Cao Dai Church but placed it under the control of the Vietnam Fatherland Front in 1977. The Government banned several of the Church's essential ceremonies because it considered them "superstitious," and it imprisoned and reportedly killed many Cao Dai clergy in the late 1970s. The Government began recognizing Cao Dai organizations in 1995. In 1997, a Cao Dai Management Council drew up a new constitution under government oversight. It confirmed the ban on certain traditional "superstitious" rituals, including the use of mediums to communicate with spirits. Because the use of mediums was essential to

ceremonies accompanying promotion of clerics to higher ranks, the new Cao Dai constitution effectively banned clerical promotions. In December 1999, the Management Council reached agreement with Cao Dai clergy that the Cao Dai Church would modify its rituals in a way that would be acceptable to the Government but maintain enough spiritual direction to be acceptable to Cao Dai principles. As a result, a congress was held in which several hundred Cao Dai clergy were promoted for the first time since 1975. A second congress was held in 2002. The Cao Dai Management Council has the power to control all of the affairs of the Cao Dai faith and thereby manages the Church's operations, its hierarchy, and its clergy within the country. Independent Cao Dai officials oppose the edicts of this council as unfaithful to Cao Dai principles and traditions. Religious training takes place at individual Cao Dai temples rather than at centralized schools; Cao Dai officials have indicated that they do not wish to open a seminary.

The Muslim Association of Vietnam was banned in 1975 but reauthorized in 1992. It is the only registered Muslim organization in the country. Association leaders state they are able to practice their faith, including saying daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and teaching the Koran. At least 9 Muslims made the hajj during the period covered by this report, and at least 75 Muslim students from the country were studying abroad.

The Government restricts and monitors all forms of public assembly, including assembly for religious activities; however, on some occasions large religious gatherings have been allowed, such as the Catholic celebrations at La Vang, traditional pilgrimage events such as the Hung Kings' Festival, and the Hoa Hao Founding Day and commemoration of the Founder's death, with attendance estimated at hundreds of thousands each year. Even house church Protestants have been able to gather in groups of as many as 5,000 for special worship services in HCMC and elsewhere. In March, the police in HCMC reportedly sent a circular to hotels noting an increase in the use of hotel function rooms for "illegal preaching" and other prohibited activities and reminded owners to exert proper oversight and alert the police to such meetings.

In 1999, the Government issued a decree on religion that prescribed the rights and responsibilities of religious believers. The religious decree states that persons formerly detained or imprisoned must obtain special permission from the authorities before they may resume religious activities. Religious activities are not allowed in prisons, nor are visits by religious workers.

The Government prohibits proselytizing by foreign missionary groups and discourages public proselytizing outside of recognized worship centers, even by Vietnamese citizens. Some missionaries visited the country despite this prohibition and carried on informal proselytizing activities. The Government has in the past deported some foreign persons for unauthorized proselytizing, sometimes defining proselytizing very broadly, although there were no known cases during the period covered by this report.

In Hanoi and HCMC, there were Sunday morning Catholic masses conducted in English by local Vietnamese priests for the convenience of foreigners and also well-publicized Protestant worship services for foreigners conducted by foreigners. An expatriate worship service at a hotel in Da Nang was cancelled by management this year, reportedly at the request of the Government. There were regularly scheduled Muslim services for citizens and foreigners in both cities.

Government policy does not permit persons who belong to unofficial religious groups to speak publicly about their beliefs, but at least some continue to conduct religious training and services without harassment. Members of registered groups in theory are permitted to speak about their beliefs and attempt to persuade others to adopt their religions, at least in recognized places of worship, but are discouraged from doing so elsewhere. The Government has been known to restrict religious speech on various legal pretexts including "sowing division between believers and nonbelievers" and "damaging national unity."

The Government requires all religious publishing to be done by the Religious Publishing House, which is a part of the Office of Religious Affairs, or by other government-approved publishing houses after the Government first approves the proposed items. A range of Buddhist sacred scriptures, Bibles, and other religious texts and publications are printed by these organizations and are distributed openly. The Religious Publishing House has printed 250,000 copies of parts of the Hoa Hao sacred scriptures, along with 100,000 volumes featuring the Founder's teachings and prophesies; however, Hoa Hao believers reported that the Government continued to restrict the distribution of the full scriptures, specifically the poetry of the Founder. The official Hoa Hao Representative Committee cited a lack of funds, not government restrictions, as the reason why the Hoa Hao scriptures had not yet been published in full. The Muslim Association reportedly was able to print enough copies of the Koran in 2000 to distribute one to each Muslim believer in the country. Unrecognized Protestant groups

are often unable to obtain Bibles and other religious materials through legal channels. Bibles in ethnic minority languages are also in very short supply.

The Government allows religious travel for religious persons; Muslims are able to undertake the hajj, and Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant officials also have been able to travel abroad for study and for conferences. Some religious believers, such as UBCV monk Thich Thai Hoa, who do not belong to officially recognized religions occasionally have not been approved for foreign travel, but since early 2001 many ministers of underground Protestant churches have been able to travel frequently overseas. Like other citizens, religious persons who travel abroad sometimes are questioned about their activities upon their return and required to surrender their passports. However, this practice appears to be becoming more infrequent, and even many leaders of underground Protestant churches reported in 2002 and 2003 that they were not questioned. In January, Vietnamese house church pastors Tran Dinh Ai and Ho Hieu Ha, who had recently emigrated abroad, were refused re-entry to the country. Catholic bishops face no restrictions on international travel, including to Rome, and many nuns have also been able to go abroad for study and conferences. The Government also allowed many Catholic bishops and priests to travel freely within their dioceses and allowed greater, but sometimes restricted, freedom for domestic travel outside of these areas, particularly in many ethnic areas.

Religious affiliation is indicated on citizens' national identification cards and on "family books," which are household identification documents. In practice many citizens who consider themselves religious do not indicate this on their identification card, and government statistics list them as nonreligious. There are no formal prohibitions on changing one's religion. While it is possible to change the entry for religion on national identification cards, many converts may find the procedures overly cumbersome or fear government retribution. Formal conversions appear to be relatively rare, apart from non-Catholics marrying Catholics. The Government does not designate persons' religions on passports.

The Government allows, and in some cases encourages, links by officially recognized religious bodies with coreligionists in other countries; however, the Government actively discourages contacts between the UBCV and its foreign Buddhist supporters. Contacts between Vatican authorities and Catholics in the country occur routinely, and the Government maintains a regular, active dialogue with the Vatican on a range of issues including organizational activities, the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations, and a possible papal visit. A senior Vatican official visited the country in April and was allowed to travel to dioceses in several locations. Contacts between some unregistered Protestant organizations and their foreign supporters are discouraged but occur regularly, including training and the provision of some financial support and religious materials. The Government is particularly vigilant about contact between separatist "Dega" Protestants in the Central Highlands and their overseas supporters. The Government regards Dega Protestants as a group that uses religion as a rallying point for militant action to establish an independent "Dega" state. A Dega group overseas, operating as Montagnard Foundation, Inc., has set up a self-proclaimed government in exile and contacted some individuals in the country to advance its agenda. Estimates by one local Protestant leader of the percentage of Protestants actively affiliated with or sympathetic to the Dega in one particular Central Highlands Province run as high as 20 percent, while other estimates are much lower.

On April 10, protests by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak and Gia Lai, and possibly Dak Nong, reportedly were violently suppressed by police and government authorities. Some of the protestors turned to violence as well, throwing stones and threatening police. Montagnard Foundation, Inc. representatives claimed that restrictions on religious freedom were a major cause of the protests. The Government, as well as many Catholic and both official and unofficial Protestant church leaders within the country, said the protests were largely unrelated to religious issues but were due primarily to land disputes, local corruption, traditional ethnic animosities, and perceived discrimination against ethnic minority groups by the majority Vietnamese Kinh.

Adherence to a religious faith generally does not disadvantage persons in civil, economic, and secular life, although it likely would prevent advancement to the highest CPV, government, and military ranks. The military does not have a chaplaincy. Avowed religious practice was formerly a bar to membership in the CPV but now the CPV claims that tens of thousands of the 2.6 million Communist Party members are religious believers. A January 2003 CPV Central Committee resolution on religion called for recruiting and advancing more religious believers into the CPV's ranks. Clergy and believers of various faiths serve in local and provincial government positions and are represented on the National Assembly. CPV and government officials routinely visited pagodas and temples and sometimes even attended Christian church services, making a special point to visit Protestant churches in the Central Highlands over Christmas.

The 1999 religious decree stipulates which local offices must approve renovations, modifications, and repairs of religious structures. It also requires groups to obtain the approval of provincial authorities before constructing religious structures. Local authorities reportedly have used these measures to justify the closure and demolition of small religious structures belonging to unregistered Protestant groups, particularly in Dak Lak and other Central Highlands provinces. The decree stated that no religious organization can reclaim lands or properties taken over by the State following the end of the 1954 war against French rule and the 1975 Communist victory in the south. Despite this blanket prohibition, the Government has returned some church properties confiscated since 1975. One of the vice-chairmen of the recognized VBS stated that approximately 30 percent of Buddhist properties confiscated in HCMC have been returned since 1975, and from 5 to 10 percent of all Buddhist properties confiscated in the south have been returned. However, the former Protestant seminary in Nha Trang is used for secular purposes, as is a former Protestant seminary in Hanoi. The Catholic and recognized Protestant organizations have obtained a number of previously confiscated properties but still have ongoing disputes--often with local and provincial officials--over former church properties. Most Cao Dai and Hoa Hao properties also have not been returned, according to church leaders. The recognized Hoa Hao Administrative Council has acknowledged that the Government returned 12 previously confiscated Hoa Hao pagodas in Dong Thap Province in 2001 and 2002.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools; however, it permits clergy to teach at universities in subjects in which they are qualified. Buddhist monks have lectured at the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy, the main CPV school. Several Catholic nuns and at least one Catholic priest teach at HCMC universities. They are not allowed to wear religious dress when they teach or to identify themselves as clergy. Catholic religious education, on weekends or evenings, is permitted in most areas and has increased in recent years in churches throughout the country. Khmer Theravada Buddhists and Cham Muslims regularly hold religious and language classes outside of normal classroom hours in their respective pagodas and mosques.

Local Protestant sources alleged that authorities in many localities in Dak Lak prohibited Protestant children from attending school past the third grade. There have been unconfirmed allegations that Christians are excluded from special ethnic minority boarding schools. Discrimination of this sort has been denied by local authorities and some church leaders, but such reports persist. General discrimination against ethnic minorities has long been a problem in the region.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

A significant number of religious believers experience harassment or repression because they operate without legal sanction. Local officials have repressed unregistered Protestant believers in the Central and Northwest Highlands and other areas by forcing church gatherings to cease, demolishing or closing house churches, and pressuring them to renounce their religious beliefs, often unsuccessfully. Restrictions on UBCV leaders intensified during the period covered by this report, with much of the group's leadership placed under official or de facto pagoda arrest. Police authorities often questioned persons who hold independent religious or political views. There were credible reports that officials arbitrarily detained, beat, and harassed some persons based, at least in part, on their religious beliefs and practice, particularly in mountainous ethnic minority areas.

The penal code establishes penalties for offenses that are defined only vaguely, including "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and nonbelievers." In some cases, particularly involving Hmong Protestants, authorities have used provisions of the penal code that allow for jail terms of up to 3 years without trial for "abusing freedom of speech, press, or religion." There have been ongoing complaints that officials fabricated evidence, and that some of the provisions of the law used to convict religious prisoners contradict the right to freedom of religion.

A 1997 directive on administrative probation gives national and local security officials broad powers to detain and monitor citizens and control where they live and work for up to 2 years if they are believed to be threatening "national security." In their implementation of administrative probation, some local authorities held persons under conditions resembling house arrest. The authorities use administrative probation as a means of controlling persons whom they believe hold independent opinions. Some local authorities cite "abuse of religious freedom" as a reason to impose administrative probation.

On numerous occasions throughout the country, small groups of Protestants belonging to house churches were subjected to harassment or arbitrary detention after local officials broke up unsanctioned religious meetings. There were many reported instances, particularly in remote provinces, in which Protestant house church

followers were detained, beaten, or fined by local officials for participation in peaceful religious activities such as worship and Bible study.

On June 8, authorities in HCMC detained activist Mennonite house church pastor Nguyen Hong Quang for "inciting others to interfere with public security officers in furtherance of their duties." At the end of the period covered by this report, Quang had not been released or formally charged with any crime, as authorities carried out their investigation. Quang's detention is directly related to a March 4 incident in which several of his followers confronted persons they believed to be public security officers surveilling the pastor's home and seized an officer's motorbike. Those same followers then scuffled with other public security officers who arrived at the scene to retrieve the motorbike and investigate the incident. Four of Pastor Quang's followers were detained at the time, and another was detained afterwards in connection with Pastor Quang's arrest.

In December 2003, police in Hanoi and HCMC detained 16 members of an unregistered Protestant group affiliated with Pastor Quang for handing out Christian pamphlets disguised as official programs for the South East Asian Games. On March 25, Hanoi police detained 11 Hmong and 2 Kinh Protestants as they watched the film "The Passion of the Christ" in a private residence in Hanoi. In both cases, the detainees were released within 24 hours.

Authorities in the Central and Northwest Highlands reportedly restricted the religious freedom of members of evangelical Protestant house churches, especially among minority ethnic groups. Several leaders of these nonrecognized churches, especially among the Hmong in the northwest and among ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands, reportedly were harassed or detained, and sometimes pressured to renounce their faith, usually without success. House churches are frequently tolerated or ignored in some places, although their unofficial status often leaves them at the mercy of local authorities.

There are unconfirmed reports that officials in Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Ha Giang, and other provinces in the north and northwest attempted to force Hmong and other ethnic minority Christians to recant their faith, often without success. There are also unconfirmed reports that in Hoang Su Phi district of Ha Giang Province at least three Protestant house church leaders were sentenced to prison terms for leading "gatherings that caused public disorder" after organizing unauthorized religious services. Officials in Bac Ha district of Lao Cai Province reportedly detained four Protestant house church leaders and pressured other Protestants to sign documents renouncing their faith. In Muong Te District of Lai Chau Province, two girls reportedly were raped by government officials or militia to punish their families for adhering to Protestantism. Also in Muong Te district of Lai Chau Province, local authorities reportedly damaged or destroyed two houses used for nonrecognized Protestant services. U.S. diplomats requested that the Government provide further information about these and other alleged abuses but received no response.

Hmong Protestant Vang Seo Giao of Ha Giang Province died in July 2003, reportedly after being beaten by authorities at the office of the People's Committee in Che La commune. A CPV member since 1990 who had recently converted to Christianity, Giao reportedly was beaten for refusing to renounce his faith and build an ancestral altar, and also for refusing to drink alcohol. Giao's family and friends appealed to the Government and to the ECVN-North to investigate his death. In response to inquiries by U.S. diplomats, Ha Giang provincial officials stated that Giao died in a flood. Senior government officials in Hanoi also claimed that Giao drowned attempting to cross a river while drunk.

Hmong Protestant believer Mua Say So of Dien Bien district, Dien Bien Province, reportedly was detained in April 2003 and accused of involvement in the death of his brother, Protestant believer Mua Bua Senh. Mua Bua Senh had died in 2002, reportedly after being beaten by authorities for refusing to renounce his faith. In October 2003, the Government informed U.S. diplomats that Mua Bua Senh had died of natural causes, but by the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had not responded to Embassy inquiries about Mua Say So's current status or the reason for his continued detention.

There were reports that local authorities used a noxious gas to break up a Hmong Protestant worship service in Lai Chau Province in December 2002. Provincial authorities initially acknowledged an incident without giving details but later denied the reports entirely.

According to reports from the Central and Northwest Highlands, some local officials extorted goods, livestock, and money from Protestant believers. There were reports from the same regions of local officials driving ethnic minority persons out of their home villages for refusing to renounce their Protestant faith. The extent to which religious affiliation or other factors such as ethnicity or political activism caused these reported abuses could not

be determined, although many reports stated that authorities cited religion as the reason for their actions.

Despite restrictions the number of Protestants continued to grow. The repression of Protestantism in the Central Highlands is complicated by the presence of the small "Dega" separatist group, which advocates an autonomous or independent homeland for the indigenous persons who live in the area, particularly in southern Gia Lai and northwestern Dak Lak provinces. The Dega have links to a group residing in the U.S., Montagnard Foundation, Inc., that has proclaimed itself a Dega "government-in-exile." While many Dega followers are Protestant, the relationship between the Degas and Protestant believers belonging to the recognized SECV or apolitical house church groups is tense. The Degas reportedly have made threats against certain mainstream Protestant pastors, many of whom accuse the Degas of using religion for political purposes. A small number of Protestant pastors in this area reportedly support the establishment of an autonomous "Dega" state; however, the more orthodox majority of Protestant pastors in the Highlands do not.

On April 10, several thousand ethnic minority citizens protested against authorities in several districts in the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak and Gia Lai (and possibly Dak Rong). Authorities reportedly violently suppressed the protests, including beating or killing some of the protestors. A number of the protestors reportedly resorted to violence as well. Individuals supporting the Dega movement from abroad claimed that restrictions on religious freedom were a significant motivating factor in the protests. The Government, as well as many official and unofficial religious leaders, depicted the protests as being entirely political in nature. However, a government official indicated that, in the wake of the protests, the Government would delay further registration of churches and normalization of religious activities in the region. The Government blocked access to the Central Highlands by most foreign observers for 2 weeks after the April protests. When it again began to allow access for foreign diplomats, journalists, and others, strict control by officials, police, and plainclothes security agents made obtaining genuinely free and independent assessments of the situation in the area extremely difficult.

Outflows of ethnic minority highlanders--usually called "Montagnards"--seeking refugee status in Cambodia on religious grounds continued during the period covered by this report and increased slightly after the April 10 protests. Apparently at the request of the Government, many of the Montagnards who fled to Cambodia during this period were repatriated by Cambodian authorities with no consideration given to their allegations of abuse in Vietnam or requests for refugee status. In December 2002 and March 2003, at least 13 ethnic minority individuals were sentenced to prison terms related to unrest that took place in 2001. Government officials insist that these sentences were not related to any religious activities, although often the alleged adherence of the detainees to the Dega movement complicated the issue.

Protestants also reported that authorities in Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and some nearby provinces detained, beat, and harassed numerous Protestant believers, often in conjunction with pressure to renounce their faith. In March, officials in Sa Thay district, Kon Tum Province, reportedly beat several ethnic Ja Rai Protestant leaders while pressuring them to renounce their faith and cease their religious activities. Also in March, a Protestant lay leader in Kon Tum was reportedly fined by police, had Bibles and religious banners confiscated, and was threatened with imprisonment after holding unlicensed religious gatherings. In 2002, officials reportedly cut off electricity to the homes of ethnic Ede villagers in Ea Trol village in coastal Phu Yen Province after they refused to give up Christianity.

A purported Party document dated October 22, 2002, from Cu Mgar district in Dak Lak described Dega Christianity as a reactionary plot rather than a true religion and stated that investigation of the Dega Christian organization discovered 150 members as well as the presence of 440 illegal Protestant congregations in Dak Lak. In October 2002, the SECV complained that authorities had forced approximately 400 unofficial Protestant congregations in Dak Lak to disband. The Catholic Episcopal Council sent a letter of complaint, apparently largely about the difficulties Protestants were experiencing in the Central Highlands, to the Government and National Assembly in late 2002.

A May 2003 report by a foreign NGO alleged a program by local authorities, with the stated intention to "eradicate Christianity," to force Protestants in Dak Song Commune in then-Dak Lak Province (now in Dak Nong Province) to stop holding church gatherings of more than five persons.

The Government continued to isolate certain religious figures by restricting their movements and by pressuring supporters and family members. In October 2003, the UBCV held an unauthorized conference in Binh Dinh Province, reportedly to revitalize the organization and make appointments to leadership positions. Subsequent to the conference, authorities detained many leaders of the group and returned them to their respective

pagodas. Four leaders of the UBCV--Thich Tue Sy, Thich Nguyen Ly, Thich Thanh Huyen, and **Thich Dong Tho**--were subsequently sentenced without trial to 2 years of administrative detention, which is similar to house arrest. Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and deputy leader Thich Quang Do were briefly investigated for "possession of state secrets" after the October meeting and placed under conditions resembling house arrest in their respective pagodas. Authorities have not allowed them to leave their pagodas and have regularly cut off their telephone connections and prohibited most visitors from meeting them. Many other leaders of the UBCV, including Thich Thien Hanh, Thich Thai Hoa, Thich Nguyen Vuong, Thich Vien Dinh, and Thich Phuoc An, were also placed under conditions resembling house arrest at their pagodas after the October meeting, despite the absence of any charges against them.

Hoa Hao believers stated that a number of the leaders of the unofficial Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC) remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report. Those in detention include Ha Hai, the third-ranking officer of the HHCBC who had been sentenced to 5 years in prison in 2001 for abusing "democratic rights," as well as Hoa Hao believer Truong van Duc, who had been involved in an incident in 2000 in which 60 to 70 individuals attacked a group of Hoa Hao headed by church leader Le Quang Liem. Hoa Hao follower Nguyen Van Lia reportedly was sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment in October 2003, after holding a commemoration of the disappearance of the Hoa Hao prophet. U.S. diplomats requested that the Government provide information about these and other Hoa Hao believers currently incarcerated but had received no response by the end of the period covered by this report.

Priests and lay brothers of the Catholic order Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix continued to face government restrictions. Founded by Reverend Tran Dinh Thu in Bui Chu Diocese in 1953, the historically anti-Communist order re-established its headquarters in Thu Duc District of HCMC in 1954. In 1988 police surrounded the 15-acre site and arrested all the priests and lay persons inside the compound. All but two of those detained--Father Pham Minh Tri and layperson Nguyen Thien Phung--subsequently were released. Father Tri reportedly was in poor health. Father Tri and Phung remained imprisoned at Xuan Loc camp, Dong Nai Province, despite some indications in December from senior government officials that they would be released. Both were originally given 20-year sentences, although Father Tri's was later reduced by 27 months, and by 3 more months in an April general amnesty.

Cao Dai believer Ngo Van Thong was arrested in 1977 and sentenced to death by a Tay Ninh provincial court; his sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. He is believed to be in prison near Hanoi, but the Government has not responded to inquiries by U.S. diplomats about his condition.

In February 2001 at Tu Hieu Pagoda, on the day before the start of the "week of prayer," Catholic Father Nguyen Van Ly, Hoa Hao elder Le Quang Liem, and Buddhists monks Thich Thien Hanh and Thich Chan Tri met for the purpose of forming an interreligious body independent of government authority. Later in the same month, police surrounded Father Ly's church and placed him under administrative probation. His detention was reported widely in the state-controlled press, which identified him as a "traitor" for submitting written testimony critical of the Government to a U.S. human rights commission. In May 2001, allegedly as many as 300 police surrounded his church and arrested him. In October 2001, the Thua Thien-Hue Provincial People's Court convicted Father Ly and sentenced him to a total of 15 years in prison--2 years for disobeying the administrative probation order and 13 years for "damaging the Government's unity policy." The court also ordered 5 years of administrative detention, which is to confine him to his place of residence after his release. Father Ly had called not only for religious freedom but also for an end to one-party rule. In July 2003, the Ha Nam provincial court reduced Father Ly's sentence by 5 years in recognition of good behavior, and in June his sentence was further reduced by another 5 years. In January, U.S. visitors were allowed to meet with Father Ly and provide him letters and medicine.

It was impossible to determine the exact number of religious detainees and religious prisoners. There is little transparency in the justice system, and it is very difficult to obtain confirmation of when persons are detained, imprisoned, tried, or released. Moreover, persons sometimes are detained for questioning and subsequently held under conditions amounting to house arrest using administrative probation regulations without being charged or without their detention being publicized. By the end of the period covered by this report, there reportedly were at least nine religious detainees thought to be held without formal arrest or charge; however, the number may be much greater. Unconfirmed reports suggest there may be over 100 other Protestants detained in the Central Highlands, although the reasons for their incarceration may not be entirely related to their religious faith. Among those believed to be detained without having gone to trial are Hmong Protestant Mua Say So in Dien Bien; Hmong Protestants Vang Chin Sang, Ly Sin Quang, and Ly Giang Sung in Ha Giang

Province; and Dinh Troi, an ethnic Hre Protestant detained in Quang Ngai in 1999. A number of other UBCV, Cao Dai, Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Protestant dignitaries and believers had their movements restricted or were watched and followed by police.

There were an estimated 44 religious prisoners and detainees, although the actual number may be much higher. This figure is difficult to verify because of the secrecy surrounding the arrest, detention, and release process. At least 11 other individuals were held in conditions resembling house arrest for reasons related to the expression of their religious beliefs or attempts to form nonauthorized religious organizations, despite the apparent lack of any official charges against them. Those persons believed to be imprisoned or detained at least in part for the peaceful expression of their religious faith at the end of the period covered by this report included: UBCV monk Thich Thien Minh; Catholic priests Pham Minh Tri and Nguyen Van Ly, and Catholic lay person Nguyen Thien Phung; Protestant believers Mua A Chau, Vang Chin Sang, Vang Mi Ly, Ly Xin Quang, and Ly Chin Seng; Cao Dai believer Ngo Van Thong; and Hoa Hao lay persons Nguyen Van Lia, Ha Hai, and Truong Van Duc. UBCV monks Thich Tue Sy, Thich Nguyen Ly, Thich Thanh Huyen, and Thich Dong Tho were given 2-year sentences of administrative detention in 2003. Other religious leaders, including UBC monks Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do and Catholic priest Pham Van Loi, were under de facto house arrest. Hoa Hao leaders Nguyen Van Dien and Le Quan Liem remained under formal administrative detention.

There were numerous reports that groups of vigilantes or "gangs of hoodlums" beat Protestant believers in the Central Highlands. In 2002, allegedly at the instigation of commune and district authorities, a "gang" in the predominantly Catholic village of Dak Chach, Dak La commune, Kon Tum Province, reportedly beat Protestant believers Du Van Anh and Y Thet (husband and wife) and pastor Dinh Van Truc for not renouncing their faith. Forced to flee the village soon afterwards, Anh and Y Thet sought refuge in neighboring villages during 2002 and into early 2003, reportedly being expelled by village authorities each time. In 2002, a "gang" in Buon Eu Sup village, Dak Lak Province, reportedly beat Protestant believer Siu Kret. His father complained to local police about the incident. The police fined the gang members \$33 (VND 500,000) and a pig, but the victim's father reportedly had to swear to police he was not a Protestant believer to collect the compensation.

Forced Religious Conversion

On multiple occasions, local officials in several northwestern villages reportedly attempted to convince or force Hmong Protestants to recant their faith and sometimes also to perform traditional Hmong religious rites such as drinking blood from sacrificed chickens mixed with rice wine. Local authorities reportedly also encouraged clan elders to pressure members of their extended families to cease practicing Christianity and to return to traditional practices.

Following ethnic unrest in the Central Highlands in 2001, there also were numerous reports of local authorities attempting to force ethnic minority Protestants to renounce their faith. In the villages of Druh, B'Le, B'Gha, V'Sek, Koyua, Tung Thang, Tung Kinh, and Dung in Ea H'Leo district of Dak Lak Province, ethnic minority commune and district officials, some of whom are ethnic minorities themselves, were assigned to coerce Protestant followers symbolically to abandon Protestantism by drinking alcohol mixed with animal blood in a ritual called "the ceremony of repentance." In the villages of Buon Sup, Buon Ea Rok, and Buon Koya in Ea Sup district, Dak Lak Province, ethnic minority Protestants were pressured to undergo a similar ritual recantation of faith. There were some reports of this occurring in other instances during the period covered by this report.

In other provinces, authorities encouraged "revival of traditional culture," which includes abandoning Christian beliefs. According to what appears to be an official document from Khanh Hoa Province, in 2002 police convinced numerous households to abandon Protestantism and in some cases provided a cash reward as part of efforts to stamp out "illegal" religious activities.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The status of respect for religious freedom overall remained fundamentally unchanged during the period

covered by this report. It improved slightly in some areas, but remained poor or even deteriorated in parts of the Central Highlands and Northwest Highlands. In January 2003, a CPV Central Committee resolution on religion passed acknowledged the legitimate role of religious groups in social and charitable activities; however, it also reinforced that the CPV should control religious groups, that their activities should take place within legally defined bounds, and that illegal religious activity would be suppressed.

After the issuance of the decree on the "Operation of Protestantism in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc Province" by the Office of Religious Affairs in December 2003, 10 new churches were officially recognized in the Central Highlands, and preparations began to establish a local bible school for training classes that may lead to the recognition of many preachers working in unofficial status. In February 2003, the SECV opened an official theological school with 50 students and informed the Government that it was training more students outside the school.

Some leaders of nonrecognized Protestant churches reported that they continued negotiating with the Government for recognition, although no new recognitions were granted. Some pastors also reported that police surveillance of their worship activities has declined or ended, in some cases as long ago as early 2001. Some also reported that they have been able to conduct training activities openly. Many leaders of Protestant house churches have been allowed to travel overseas on multiple occasions.

Catholic leaders reported they were able to assign priests more easily than in the past, even in some remote areas where no priests had been assigned for decades. Attendance at religious services continued to increase during the period covered by this report. The number of Buddhist monks and Catholic priests also continued to increase. Local authorities in many parts of the country allowed religious organizations to engage in more charitable and social activities in line with the Party's new resolution. Many Catholic priests and nuns and Buddhist monks continued to operate orphanages, vocational centers, and health clinics with the knowledge of the Government. In addition there was continued gradual expansion of the parameters for individual believers adhering to one of the officially recognized religious bodies to practice their faiths.

Several thousand prisoners benefited from early releases through general amnesties during the period covered by this report, but it is unknown whether any of them were imprisoned for reasons related to expression of their religious faith.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

In general there are amicable relations among the various religious communities, and there were no known instances of societal discrimination or violence based on religion during the period covered by this report. In HCMC there were some informal ecumenical dialogues among leaders of disparate religious communities. Buddhists, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai reportedly sometimes cooperate on some social and charitable projects. Working-level cooperation between the Catholic and Protestant churches occurs in many parts of the country. Various elements of the UBCV Buddhists, Catholics, Cao Dai, Protestant, and Hoa Hao communities appeared to network with each other; many of them reportedly formed bonds while serving prison terms at Xuan Loc.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. Consulate General in HCMC actively and regularly raised U.S. concerns about religious freedom with a wide variety of CPV leaders and government officials, including authorities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and other offices in Hanoi, HCMC, and the provinces. During a visit to the country in October 2003, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom advocated for greater religious freedom and enquired about reported abuses with the Deputy Prime Minister, Deputy Foreign Minister, Deputy Minister of Public Security, the head of the Office of Religious Affairs, the Chairman of the Fatherland Front, and other government officials. He also met with leaders of various recognized and nonrecognized religious groups. During the visit, he provided a list of alleged religious prisoners and requested information about why they were being held. The Government provided a partial response to this list. He also requested that the Government investigate reports of the killing of believers, including Mua Bua Senh and Vang Seo Giao, and allegations of rape, harassment, and arbitrary detentions of religious believers. He also asked the Government to investigate claims of forced renunciations and issue a clear prohibition.

The U.S. Ambassador, the Deputy Chief of Mission, the Consul General in HCMC, and other Embassy and Consulate officers have raised religious freedom issues with senior cabinet ministers, including the Prime

Minister, two Deputy Prime Ministers, the Foreign Minister, other senior government and CPV officials, the head of the Office of Religious Affairs, Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Public Security, officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' External Relations Office in HCMC, chairpersons of Provincial People's Committees around the country, and other officials, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands. Embassy and Consulate General officials maintained regular contact with the key government offices responsible for respect for human rights. Embassy officers repeatedly informed government and CPV officials that the lack of progress on religious problems and human rights are a significant impediment to the full normalization of bilateral relations. The Embassy also distributed information about the U.S. concerns regarding religious freedom to government officials.

The Ambassador and other Mission officers urged recognition of a broad spectrum of religious groups, including members of the UBCV, the Protestant house churches, and dissenting Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. They also urged greater freedom for recognized religious groups. Embassy and Consulate General officials also focused on specific abuses and restrictions on religious freedom. The Ambassador and other Mission officers repeatedly advocated ending restrictions on Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do, among others, and freeing Father Nguyen Van Ly. The Ambassador also requested that the Government investigate a number of cases of alleged abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. They, along with the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific and the Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, urged a clear ban on attempts at forced renunciation and called for the re-opening of house churches that had been closed.

The April 2001 recognition of the SECV followed direct advocacy by U.S. officials during human rights dialogues and ongoing discussions involving the Ambassador, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and other U.S. officials. The State Department declined to hold a human rights dialogue with the Government in 2003 as a sign of displeasure over limited progress on issues discussed in previous dialogues.

Representatives of the Embassy and the Consulate General met on numerous occasions with leaders of all the major religious communities, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Muslims, Hindus, and Baha'is. In March, a Consulate General officer met with the recognized Hoa Hao Administrative Council in An Giang Province and maintained regular contact with Hoa Hao dissidents and Hoa Hao elder Tran Huu Duyen. Mission officers met senior Cao Dai clergy affiliated with the pre-1975 Cao Dai leadership in Hanoi on different occasions. In April, the Ambassador met with Thich Huyen Quang while he was under conditions resembling house arrest at his pagoda, and during the period from June to October 2003 the Consul General met with UBCV monk Thich Quang Do when he was not under restrictions. Consulate General officers maintained regular contact with other UBCV Buddhist monks. Embassy and Consulate General officers met with the Cardinal of HCMC, the Catholic Archbishop of Hue, and the bishops of Hung Hoa, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Kontum, Lang Son, Buon Ma Thuot, Dalat, and Haiphong as well as other members of the Episcopal Conference. The Ambassador and other Mission officers met with outspoken priest Chan Tin on several occasions during the period covered by this report. Embassy and Consulate General officers also met repeatedly with leaders of various Protestant house churches and with leaders of the Muslim community. When traveling outside of Hanoi and HCMC, Embassy and Consulate General officers regularly meet with provincial Religious Affairs Committees, village elders, local clergy, and believers.

The U.S. Government commented publicly on the status of religious freedom in the country on several occasions. The Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs discussed concerns about religious freedom during the annual bilateral political dialogue held in Hanoi in May. The Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, during his October 2003 visit to the country, warned that failure by the Government to improve conditions might lead to designation of Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" and suggested improvements the Government might take to avoid this designation. Senior U.S. officials repeated this warning on several occasions during the year.

U.S. Government pressure may have had an immediate impact in some cases. After Consulate General officials highlighted the case of an unofficial Protestant church threatened with demolition in HCMC, authorities backed off their threats and eventually allowed the church to continue operations. After continued pressure through diplomatic channels, the Government allowed the U.S. Ambassador access to Thich Huyen Quang, and also permitted access of a U.S. Senator to imprisoned priest Nguyen Van Ly. The December 2003 decree laying out steps for increased activity by the SECV in the Central Highlands followed shortly after the visit of the Ambassador at Large for international Religious Freedom. In broader terms, some religious sources have cited diplomatic intervention, primarily from the U.S., as a reason why the Government is seeking to legalize more religious groups and is allowing already legalized groups more freedom. In September 2004, the Secretary of

State designated Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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