



Vietnam

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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Both the Constitution and law provide for freedom of worship; however, the Government continued to restrict organized activities of religious groups that it declared to be at variance with state laws and policies. The Government generally allowed persons to practice individual worship in the religion of their choice, but the country's legal framework governing religion requires that the Government officially sanction the organization and activities of all religious denominations.

Respect for religious freedom improved during the period covered by this report; however, a number of positive legal reforms remained in the initial stages of implementation. During the period covered by this report, the Government released a number of religious prisoners, facilitated a long-delayed national convention by one of the country's Protestant organizations, allowed the opening of a new training class for Protestant pastors, and introduced several new, less restrictive legal documents governing religion. In November 2004, the Ordinance on Religion and Belief went into effect and now serves as the primary document governing religious practice. In February 2005, the Prime Minister issued an "Instruction on Protestantism" that directed officials to assist unrecognized religious denominations in registering their activities so that they can practice openly. In March 2005, the implementation decree (number 22) for the new Ordinance on Religion established guidelines for religious denominations to register their activities and seek official recognition.

Participation in religious activities throughout the country continued to grow, and believers in the Central and Northwest Highlands reported improvements in their situation. However, restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of religious groups remained in place, and the Government maintained a role supervising recognized religions. Religious figures encountered the greatest restrictions when they engaged in activities that the Government perceived as political activism or a challenge to its rule. Official oversight of recognized religions and harassment or repression of followers of nonrecognized religions varied from locality to locality, often as a result of ignorance of national policy or varying local interpretations of it. Many of the hundreds of Protestant house churches in the Central Highlands that had been ordered to shut down in 2001 were able quietly to resume operations, although most had not yet sought or received official registration. Local officials in Dak Lak continued to block the opening and operation of house churches in that province. There were reports that officials pressured ethnic minority Protestants to recant their faith, but the frequency of such reports was less than in previous years. According to credible reports, the police arbitrarily detained and sometimes beat religious believers, particularly in the mountainous ethnic minority areas. The Government denied these allegations. The estimated number of prisoners and detainees held for religious reasons was at least 6, with a minimum of 15 more suffering various levels of restrictions on their activities including effective house arrest in some cases.

The relationship among religions in society generally was amicable. In various parts of the country, there were modest levels of interfaith cooperation and dialogue. 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 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 International Religious Freedom, raised concerns about the registration and recognition difficulties faced by religious organizations, the detention and arrest of religious figures, the repression of Protestants in the Central and Northwest Highlands, and other restrictions on religious freedom with the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, government cabinet ministers, Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) leaders, provincial officials, and others.

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. In May 2005, the United States and Vietnam concluded an agreement in which the Government set forth a number of commitments to advance and protect religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 127,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 83 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, although many practice traditional beliefs such as veneration of ancestors and national heroes.

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. The Office of Religious Affairs uses a much lower estimate of 12 percent (10 million) practicing Buddhists. 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. 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 proportionately fewer Buddhists in certain highland areas, although migration of Kinh to these areas is changing the distribution somewhat. 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 5,570,000. French missionaries introduced Catholicism 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 Ho Chi Minh City, in parts of the Central Highlands 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.

Estimates of the number of Protestants in the country range from the official government figure of 500,000 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 Danang. The two official recognized Protestant churches are the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), recognized in 2001, and the much smaller Evangelical Church of Vietnam: North (ECVN), recognized since 1963. The SECV has affiliated churches in all of the southern provinces of the country. The ECVN 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 mountainous regions, although it has not formally applied for official registration of any of these. There are estimates that the growth of Protestant believers has been as much as 600 percent over the past decade, despite government restrictions on proselytizing activities. Many of these persons belong to unregistered evangelical house churches. Based on believers' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including Hmong, Thai, and other minority groups in the Northwest Highlands, and 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 radiobroadcasts 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 2.4 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 Ho Chi Minh City 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 their 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 Government, there are 1.6 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. Many Hoa Hao follow other sects that do not have official recognition.

Mosques serving the country's small Muslim population, estimated at 65,000 persons, operate in western An Giang Province, Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and provinces in the southern coastal part of the country. The Muslim community is composed mainly of ethnic Cham, although in Ho Chi Minh City 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 Ho Chi Minh City, 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 Qur'an 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 Ho Chi Minh City; some are ethnic Cham but most are Indian or of mixed Indian-Vietnamese descent.

There are an estimated 6,000 members of the Baha'i Faith, largely concentrated in the south. Prior to 1975, there were an estimated 200,000 believers, according to Baha'i officials. Open Baha'i practice was banned from 1975 to 1992, and the number of believers dropped sharply during this time. Since 1992, the Baha'i have met in unofficial meeting halls. Community leaders say they have good relations with authorities. Some Baha'i members in Ho Chi Minh City were allowed to hold a quiet ceremony to mark the 50th anniversary of the Baha'i Faith in the country in May 2004.

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 Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Some are pre-1975 converts, while others became Mormons while living abroad.

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 Ho Chi Minh City.

Of the country's approximately 83 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. Many ethnic minorities have converted to Catholicism or Protestantism.

Foreign missionaries legally are not permitted to proselytize or perform religious activities. Undeclared missionaries from several countries are active in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, law, and a 2003 Communist Party Central Committee resolution on religion provide for freedom of belief and worship as well as of nonbelief; however, the Government required the registration of all activities by religious groups and used this requirement to restrict activities in certain cases and some areas. Further, the Government continued to restrict significantly the organized activities of independent religious groups and those individuals who it regarded to be a threat 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.

The Government's legal framework governing religion changed significantly during the period covered by this report. The new Ordinance on Religion and Belief came into effect on November 15, 2004. The Ordinance serves as the primary document governing religious practice in Vietnam. It reiterates citizens' rights to freedom of belief, religion, and freedom not to follow a religion, and it states that violations of these freedoms are prohibited. However, it advises 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 continues the practice of government control and oversight of religious organizations. Among its provisions are that religious denominations must be officially recognized by the national-level Government, that individual religious congregations must be recognized by appropriate lower-level authorities, and that the establishment of seminaries and enrollment of classes must be approved by appropriate authorities. The naming of priests or other religious officials requires the approval of authorities only when a "foreign element," such as the Vatican, is involved. The ordinance liberalizes government oversight of religion to some extent. For example, religious organizations are only required to inform appropriate authorities of their annual activities or the promotion and transfer of clerics, while in the past this required explicit official approval. Further, the ordinance encourages religious groups to carry out charitable activities in healthcare and education, which was limited in the past.

On March 1, the Government issued an implementing decree that provided further guidance on the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. As in the ordinance, the decree explicitly bans forced renunciations of faith. It also delineates specific procedures by which an unrecognized religious organization can register its places of worship, its clerics, and its activities, and thus operate openly. It further provides procedures for these groups to apply for official recognition from the Government to gain additional rights. The decree specifies that a religious organization must have 20 years of "stable religious operation" in the country in order to be recognized by the Government. It states that past operation in the country, even prior to registration, can be counted toward the 20-year requirement. It further sets out specific time periods for the Government to consider requests from religious organizations and requires officials to give organizations an explanation in writing for any application that is rejected.

On February 4, the Prime Minister issued the "Instruction on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism." The instruction calls upon authorities to facilitate the requests of recognized Protestant denominations to construct churches and train and appoint pastors. Further, the instruction directs authorities to help unrecognized denominations register their congregations with authorities so that they can practice openly and move towards fulfilling the criteria required for full recognition. Addressing the Central and Northwest Highlands, the instruction guides authorities to help groups of Protestant believers register their religious activities and practice in homes or "suitable locations," even if they do not meet the criteria to establish an official congregation. The instruction allows unregistered "house churches" to operate so long as they are "committed to follow regulations" and are not affiliated with separatist political movements.

In the spring of 2005, the national-level Committee for Religious Affairs held two conferences for provincial-level religious affairs committees to explain the new legal framework for religion in Vietnam, as defined in these documents. The provincial-level committees were then charged with disseminating information about the new legal framework to district-, commune-, and village-level authorities. Knowledge of the new legal framework at lower levels of the Government was mixed, however. The national-level Committee for Religious Affairs also held three conferences for leaders of officially recognized religious denominations to explain the new legal framework to practitioners. Authorities in some areas actively engaged religious leaders in efforts to implement the changes, while authorities in other areas remained ignorant of the changes.

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, members of nonrecognized religious groups sometimes undergo significant harassment or repression and are subject to the whims and prejudices of local officials. This was true particularly for Protestants in the Central and Northwest Highlands. Subsequent to the issuance of the new legal framework governing religion during this reporting period, 16 new churches were opened in the Central Highlands. At the end of the reporting period, local and, in some areas, provincial authorities were engaged in discussions with religious leaders about registering house churches or recognizing new official congregations.

National security and national solidarity provisions in the Constitution override many laws providing for 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 Protestants in the Northwest, ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands (sometimes referred to as 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." The authorities in some instances have used administrative probation to impose significant restrictions on the freedom of movement as a means of controlling persons whom they believe hold independent and potentially subversive opinions. Two-year administrative probation terms were placed on four UBCV leaders in October 2003 and remained in effect.

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 Government requires religious and other groups to register and uses this process to monitor and sometimes attempt to 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 alternative Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai organizations and many believers of these religions do not participate in the government-approved associations. The Implementing Decree of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, which was issued March 1, clarifies the procedures through which religious organizations and individual religious congregations can seek official recognition. The decree further specified that the appropriate authorities provide a written response to such request within 60 or 90 days, depending on the scope of the request. In the case of a refusal, a specific reason must be included in the written response. However, there is no specific mechanism for appeal given in the Ordinance, nor are the reasons for denying a request delimited in any way.

Some unrecognized Protestant denominations have indicated that they will seek registration and recognition under the new legal system governing religion. According to the Implementing Decree of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, however, a 1-year period is required after November 15, 2004 (the effective date of the ordinance) before any new denomination that otherwise fulfills the appropriate criteria can be recognized. To

obtain official recognition, a denomination must receive government approval of its leadership, its structure, and the overall scope of its activities. Recognized religious denominations, in principle, are allowed to open, operate, and refurbish places of worship, train religious leaders, and obtain permission for the publication of materials. In addition to denominations requiring recognition as a whole, each individual congregation within a denomination is also required by the ordinance to register. Registration is a somewhat more lenient process that requires the congregation to file with relevant authorities information about its structure, leadership, and activities. Authorities then have 45 days to raise questions or concerns. If no objections are raised, the congregation is legally authorized to operate at the end of this period. New congregations belonging to the SECV have begun to register under this new framework in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai.

Except in certain parts of the Central and Northwest Highlands, officially recognized religious organizations are able to operate openly, and followers of these religions are able to worship without harassment. Officially recognized organizations must register their annual activities and the transfer and promotion of clerics with authorities. Holding religious conferences or congresses, opening seminaries, enrolling classes in seminaries, collecting donations from believers, constructing or renovating religious facilities, and participating in religious training courses abroad still require the explicit approval of authorities. The naming of new clerics and the promotion of religious dignitaries, such as bishops, require registration with authorities. However when a "foreign element," such as the Vatican, is involved, official approval is required in advance.

Because of the lack of meaningful due process in the legal system and inadequate higher-level oversight, 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 resolution on the victims of miscarriages of justice, issued by the National Assembly in 2003, provides channels for citizens to seek official compensation for some abuses.

There are no religious national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government practices placed 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. Officially recognized religious groups faced limitations 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. However, there were significant examples of these limitations being eased in comparison to previous years.

The Government continued to ban and actively discourage participation in certain unrecognized religious groups, including the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and some Protestant, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. Organizational activities by many of these groups are illegal, though enforcement of this ban varied widely.

Some evangelical house churches do not attempt to register because they want to avoid any semblance of government control. Some recognized religious groups carried out underground religious activities that they did not report to the Government and faced little or no harassment. Some nonrecognized Protestant groups also conducted religious services and training with the cognizance of authorities and 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 Religious 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. In November 2004, the VBS broke ground on a new Vietnam Institute of Buddhism in Hanoi. Khmer Theravada Buddhists are allowed a somewhat separate identity within the VBS.

The Government continued to oppose efforts by the unrecognized UBCV to operate independently. In 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 were detained and sentenced without trial to 2 years' "administrative detention" in their respective pagodas. Authorities have not provided them with a written decision of their administrative detention, despite the legal requirement to do so. Many other

leading UBCV members have been placed under conditions similar to administrative probation and, in some cases, effectively under "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 restrictions, although the Government did not appear to be investigating its allegations of "possession of state secrets" against them. In November 2004, Thich Quang Do attempted to travel to Quy Nhon Province to visit Thich Huyen Quang, who was hospitalized at that time. Thich Quang Do was blocked from doing so and was returned to his pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City under police escort. In June 2005, a group of UBCV monks attempted to visit Thich Huyen Quang in his pagoda but were prevented by police from doing so. Thich Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang were able to receive visits from foreign diplomats and other UBCV members on occasion 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. The Catholic Church continued to face restrictions on the training and ordination of priests and the naming of 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. The Vatican and the Government reached agreement on mutually acceptable candidates, and all bishoprics were filled in 2004. 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 for enrolling in seminary and again prior to their ordination as priests. 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 more frequently. During this reporting period, the Hanoi seminary received approval to begin enrolling new classes of seminarians annually, as opposed to once every 2 years, as remains the case for all other seminaries. The Church has had an application pending for 5 years to open a new seminary in Dong Nai Province, but this approval continued to be delayed by local authorities.

The northern Protestant ECVN held its long-delayed national congress in December 2004, the first time it has been able to do so since 1988. The meeting allowed the ECVN to vote on new leadership and set priorities for the development of the Church. The congress had been delayed initially due to government refusal to permit the meeting, and in recent years due to the Church's refusal to accept government interference in the selection of its leaders. ECVN members indicated that the Government gave the Church latitude to elect new leaders at the congress, and the Government showed its approval of the new board by inviting it to meet with the Deputy Prime Minister shortly after the congress adjourned. The southern Protestant SECV held its second national congress March 1 to 4, 2005, at which it elected a new leadership board for the organization. The SECV's first congress was held in 2001.

The practice of Protestantism remained a contentious issue in Vietnam's Central Highlands provinces. Some ethnic minority "Dega" separatists operating in this region have been linked to the "Dega Church." Credible reports indicated that "Dega Protestantism" mixes religious practice with political activism and ethnic minority separatism. During the period covered by this report, house churches generally reported improved conditions in the Central Highlands provinces of Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Dak Nong, but close government scrutiny persists. In addition, significant restrictions on all Protestant churches continued to be imposed by authorities in Dak Lak Province. In 2001, the Government ordered almost all unrecognized Protestant house churches and meeting points in the Central Highlands, reportedly numbering in the hundreds, to close. Most of these have been allowed to reopen and operate, although they have not yet sought or received official registration. Local officials in Dak Lak continued to block the opening and operation of house churches in that province.

In 2003, the Committee on Religious Affairs in Hanoi issued a decree on the "normalization" of Protestantism in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc Province, intended to expedite the registration of churches in the region. Eighteen of the 33 southern Protestant SECV congregations in the Central Highlands have been recognized since the issuance of the normalization decree. In April 2005, the SECV opened a Bible school in Gai Lai Province to provide training to the many house church preachers in the region, allowing them to receive formal recognition as pastors. The SECV has sought to open a similar school in Dak Lak Province, as outlined by the 2003 decree, but local officials there remain recalcitrant. Some Protestant preachers in the Central Highlands are suspicious of the SECV due to its official sanction by the Government, and reportedly do not plan to seek affiliation with it.

The Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism instructs officials in the Central Highlands to continue to consider and recognize new chapters of the SECV. Officials are also to register those groups of Protestants

who do not yet meet the official requirements as a congregation and "create favorable conditions for them to conduct their normal religious practice at home" or at suitable locations within their village. At the end of the period covered by this report, SECV officials in Gia Lai Province were in discussions with authorities over how to implement the instruction.

The Government continued its close oversight and, with varying degrees of success, exerted control over religious hierarchies, organized religious activities, and other activities of religious groups through Committees for Religious Affairs at the national and provincial levels. While the committees are tasked with protecting the rights of recognized religious bodies, in practice there are few effective legal remedies for violations of religious freedom committed by government officials, particularly police. However, there have been some anecdotal reports that in some areas local police officials have been rebuked for harassing house churches in contravention of the Prime Minister's Order on Protestantism.

Many pastors of Protestant denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Baptists, and Assemblies of God do not wish to join the SECV because of doctrinal differences. In many parts of Vietnam, particularly in urban areas, these and other unrecognized Protestant organizations reported that they were able to practice openly and with the knowledge of local officials. While there were notable exceptions, such as with the Ho Chi Minh City Mennonite church led by Le Thi Phu Dzung, as a rule, since early 2005, the level of official harassment of house churches has declined markedly across the country. The Government has held discussions about recognition and registration with leaders of at least four Protestant denominations, including Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

There is substantial networking among Protestant denominations in Ho Chi Minh City but less in the rest of the country. House churches from pre-1975 denominations generally were reported to have fewer restrictions than those established more recently.

In the Central Highlands, many religious figures reported that there had been considerable improvements in the situation for house churches in Gia Lai Province. In neighboring Dak Lak Province, however, the Protestant community was restricted to four officially recognized churches. Unrecognized churches had difficulty meeting and Protestant believers were largely able to pray only in their own homes. Nongovernment observers attributed this both to official suspicion by Dak Lak officials and to some links between SECV and house church members and separatist groups. Despite this, the number of Protestants in Dak Lak continued to grow, and several different unrecognized Protestant denominations were active in the province.

There are no officially recognized Protestant churches in the Northwest Highlands, despite the estimated presence of over 110,000 believers in the region. The Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism noted the existence of believers in the Northwest Highlands and instructed officials to guide them in finding "suitable places" to practice their religion. Nonetheless, in April and May 2005, officials from Lai Chau, Ha Giang, and Dien Bien Provinces told foreign diplomats that there were no Christians in their respective provinces. Officials in Lao Cai Province acknowledged the presence of Protestants, and said that, in keeping with Hanoi's instruction, they were seeking to open a dialogue with the Protestants on ways they could appropriately practice their religion.

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. In the spring of 2005, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council was expanded and renamed the Executive Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism. Several leaders of the Hoa Hao community, including several pre-1975 leaders, openly criticized the Executive Committee. They claimed that the committee was subservient to the Government and demanded official recognition instead of their own Hoa Hao body, the Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC). Although still unregistered, on May 4, 2005, the HHCBC held an organizational meeting that was attended by 126 delegates from across the southern part of the country. However, it was not allowed to celebrate the religion's "Foundation Day" on June 24. Two members of the HHCBC, Tran Van Thang and Tran Van Hoang, were arrested on February 25, 2005, and sentenced to 6 and 9 months' imprisonment respectively for unauthorized distribution of audio cassettes and DVDs containing teachings of HHCBC leaders. Another Hoa Hao member, Bui Tan Nha, has been imprisoned since 1997, reportedly for reasons connected to his faith. Several leaders of the HHCBC have complained of police surveillance. The Government continued to

restrict the number of clergy that the Hoa Hao can train.

There are six different officially recognized branches of the Cao Dai Church, in southern Vietnam, as well as several others that remain unrecognized. These sects generally divide along geographic lines. The largest Cao Dai sect is based in Tay Ninh Province, where the religion was founded in 1926 and where the seat of Cao Dai authority is located. The Executive Council of the Tay Ninh Province Cao Dai received official government recognition in 1997. Independent Cao Dai groups allege that government interference has undermined the independence of the Tay Ninh group, and it no longer faithfully upholds 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 Qur'an. Several Muslims undertake the Hajj every year, most of them using assistance provided by foreign sponsors. During the period covered by this report, several Muslim students were studying abroad at the invitation of foreign governments.

The Government controls and monitors all forms of public assembly, including assembly for religious activities; however, some 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. House church Protestants have been able to gather in groups of as many as 5,000 for special worship services in Ho Chi Minh City and elsewhere.

The Government prohibits proselytizing by foreign missionary groups and discourages public proselytizing outside of recognized worship centers, including by Vietnamese citizens. Some missionaries visited the country despite this prohibition and carried on informal proselytizing activities.

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 religious organizations 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 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 prophecies; 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 Qur'an in 2000 to distribute one to each Muslim believer in the country. The Bible is printed in Vietnamese, Chinese and English, but not in ethnic minority languages. Some ethnic minority Protestants have had minority-language Bibles that were printed abroad seized by authorities.

The Government allows travel for religious purposes, but the approval of authorities is required for participation in religious conferences and training courses abroad. Muslims are able to undertake the Hajj, and Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant officials have generally been able to travel abroad for study and for conferences. Some Protestant house church leaders have alleged that they are unable to obtain passports for international travel, although other unofficial leaders travel internationally on a regular basis. 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.

Religious affiliation is indicated on citizens' national identification cards and in "family books," which are household identification documents. In practice, many citizens who consider themselves religious do not indicate this on their identification cards, 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 between officially recognized religious bodies and coreligionists in other countries; however, the Government actively discourages contacts between the UBCV and its foreign Buddhist supporters. France-based Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh was permitted to return to the country in January for a 10-week trip, his first after 39 years of exile. Thich Nhat Hanh traveled widely through the country, met with large groups of Buddhist adherents, and spoke to intellectuals and political leaders, including Prime Minister Phan Van Khai. Many of Thich Nhat Hanh's comments were critical of the situation for Buddhist believers, and he called for an end to the practice of Buddhist monks holding public offices and for reconciliation between Buddhist groups.

Contact between Vatican authorities and Catholics in the country occurs routinely, and the Government maintains a regular, active dialogue with the Vatican on a range of issues, including Church leadership, organizational activities, and the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations.

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.

Adherence to a religious faith generally does not disadvantage persons in civil, economic, and secular life, although it likely would prevent advancement to higher 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 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. In the spring of 2004, the Fatherland Front indicated it was seeking to increase representation by religious believers in People's Councils. CPV and Government officials routinely visited pagodas, temples, and churches, making a special point to visit Protestant churches in the Central Highlands over Christmas.

The Implementing Decree for the Ordinance on Religion and Belief stipulates that local religious affairs committees must approve the construction of new religious facilities. The renovation of religious facilities requires simple notification of authorities, a relaxation on previous regulations.

Religious organizations have no legal claim to 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, authorities, mostly at the provincial level, have returned a limited number of confiscated church properties and remain in discussion on other properties. One of the vice-chairmen of the Government-recognized VBS has stated that approximately 30 percent of Buddhist properties confiscated in Ho Chi Minh City have been returned, and from 5 to 10 percent of all Buddhist properties confiscated in the south have been returned. The Catholic and recognized Protestant organizations have obtained a number of previously confiscated properties but have ongoing disputes with officials over others. Some properties have been returned to the Hoa Hao Administrative Council, but few Cao Dai properties have been returned, according to church leaders. Many of the properties seized in the past were religious schools that are now incorporated into the state school system.

Although the new Ordinance on Religion and Belief "encourages" religious organizations to conduct charitable activities in education and healthcare, the degree of government oversight of these 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 Ho Chi Minh City and Hue, the Catholic Church is involved in supporting HIV/AIDS hospices and treatment centers and providing counseling to young persons. In April 2005, Ho Chi Minh City authorities did not allow the Church to open a new clinic for those who tested HIV/AIDS positive. They stated the request would need approval from higher level officials.

Charitable activities by the Catholic Church are much more restricted in northern Vietnam. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha engaged in humanitarian activities, including anti-drug programs, in many parts of the country. The officially recognized Hoa Hao organization reported that it engaged in numerous charitable activities and

local development projects. Catholic, Protestant, 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.

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 Ho Chi Minh City 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.

There were no reported anti-Semitic incidents during the period covered by this report. The country's small Jewish population is comprised almost entirely of expatriates.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Reports of abuses of religious freedom diminished during the period covered by this report. However, a significant number of religious believers continued to experience harassment or repression because they operated 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, closing house churches, and pressuring individuals to renounce their religious beliefs, often unsuccessfully. Restrictions on UBCV leaders remained in place, with much of the group's leadership placed under official or de facto pagoda arrest. Police authorities often questioned persons who held independent religious or political views. There were credible reports that officials arbitrarily detained, physically intimidated, and harassed some persons based, at least in part, on their religious beliefs and practice, particularly in mountainous ethnic minority areas.

Ho Chi Minh City police regularly targeted for harassment the Mennonite house church led by Le Thi Phu Dzung. Police called Mrs. Dzung in for questioning on several occasions, repeatedly disrupted peaceful church services, and detained groups of followers for short periods. During the period covered by this report, Mrs. Dzung's husband, Mennonite pastor and house church leader Nguyen Hong Quang, was serving a 3-year prison term. Five of his followers were sentenced to between 9 months and 2 years in prison. Quang and his followers were convicted as a result of an incident in March 2004 in which he and several of his followers confronted and scuffled with two individuals they believed to be plainclothed police officers monitoring his residence. Quang and his followers seized a motorcycle belonging to the individuals and then reportedly scuffled again with uniformed officers sent to investigate the incident when the officers attempted to impound the motorcycle. However, some observers connected Quang's arrest to his broader social activism.

The international nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch reported that security forces in Kontum Province demolished the chapel of Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh in January and September 2004. Authorities reportedly based their actions on the fact that Chinh had purchased under a false name the land on which the chapel was built. Some observers noted that at least one other unregistered Protestant church operated a short distance away from Chinh's but suffered no harassment. Chinh has reportedly complained that he has been refused issuance of an identity card, which is required for household registration and ownership of property.

There are credible allegations that Baptist pastor Than Van Truong was involuntarily committed to a mental asylum by authorities in Doing Nai Province in July 2004, as a result of his religious and political activism. He remained there through the end of the period covered by this report. He had previously been kept in pre-trial detention for 8 months for "propagandizing against the government" and under house arrest for 6 months after he was released from pre-trial detention. He was imprisoned in June 2004 for violating the terms of his house arrest but transferred to a mental asylum shortly thereafter.

In October 2004, Ho Chi Minh City police disrupted an informal religious training session for 17 Hmong pastors in a private house. The Hmong were detained by police overnight and forced to return to their home provinces in the Northwest Highlands the following day. In May 2005, police disrupted a gathering of Protestant students from Hanoi Agricultural University and detained the students for a few hours. Also in May, Protestant House Church preacher Nguyen Van Cam told a reporter that local authorities in Dong Lam Commune of Tien Hai District, Thai Binh Province, had tried on several occasions to convince him to sign documents committing him to stop holding house church services. There are unconfirmed reports that a Methodist church in Xuan Lanh

Commune, Dong Xuan District, Phu Yen Province, and a Nazarene Church in Phu Ly Commune, Vinh Cuu District, Dong Nai Province, were harassed by local authorities for holding "illegal gatherings."

Several leaders of nonrecognized churches in the Central and Northwest Highlands reportedly were harassed or detained and sometimes pressured to renounce their faith, usually without success.

House churches are frequently tolerated in some places, although their unofficial status often leaves them at the mercy of local authorities. For example, in February 2005, government border guards in Gap Trung village, Hoang Su Phi District, Ha Giang Province, reportedly intimidated local Protestants and blocked them from gathering to hold services in an unofficial house church. At least four house churches in Muong Nha Commune and Pu Nhi Commune of Dien Bien Province were reportedly unable to meet and hold religious services. In April 2005, local officials in Lu Khau Village in Ta Phin Commune of Sapa District reportedly seized the land of twelve ethnic Hmong Protestant families, telling them that God should provide food for them. The land was later returned. In addition, two Protestant believers from this village, Giang A Tinh and Trang A Cam, were reportedly beaten by local officials and urged to sign documents renouncing their faith. Sapa District authorities stated that the land seizures and physical clashes were, in fact, instigated by Hmong clan elders upset that the individuals had abandoned their traditional beliefs, and that when authorities became aware of the situation, they ensured that the land was returned.

At the end of the reporting period, the Government had not responded to Embassy inquiries about the reason for Hmong Protestant believer Mua Say So's continued detention. According to sources outside the Government, Mua Say So of Dien Bien District, Dien Bien Province, reportedly was detained in 2003 and sentenced to 42 months' imprisonment after accusing police of involvement in the death of his brother, Protestant believer Mua Bua Senh. Religious activists allege that Mua Bua Senh was beaten to death by authorities in 2002 for refusing to renounce his faith. In 2003, the Government informed diplomats that Mua Bua Senh had died of natural causes.

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 Gia Lai and Dak Lak Provinces. The Dega have links to political advocacy groups residing in the United States, including the Montagnard Foundation, Inc., which has proclaimed itself a Dega "government-in-exile." While many Dega followers are Protestant, the "Dega Church" mixes religious practice with of political activism and ethnic minority separatism. The relationship between the Degas and Protestant believers belonging to the recognized SECV or apolitical house church groups is tense. The Degas reportedly have criticized certain mainstream Protestant pastors, many of whom accuse the Degas of manipulating 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. One local Protestant leader estimated that 20 percent of Protestants in his province were actively affiliated with or sympathetic to the Dega. Other estimates of support for the Dega movement are much lower.

On April 10, 2004, several thousand ethnic minority citizens protested against authorities in several districts in the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, and Dak Nong. 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 motivated by disputes over land or other socio-economic grievances.

Outflows of ethnic minority Central Highlanders seeking refugee status in Cambodia continued during the period covered by this report, and were especially numerous from July to December 2004. Potential asylees interviewed by the Office of the United National High Commissioner for Refugees in Cambodia cited disputes over land and continued poverty more than any other reason as the cause of their flight, although religious persecution was also cited.

In February 2005, police in An Giang Province detained Hoa Hao believers Tran Van Hoang and Tran Van Thanh for distributing unauthorized audio cassettes and DVDs with religious teachings on them. On April 27, authorities sentenced them to 9 and 6 months' imprisonment, respectively. While the two were convicted of illegal distribution of recordings, the extreme rarity with which this regulation is enforced in Vietnam led observers to believe they were targeted as a result of their adherence to the unrecognized HHCB

Imprisoned leaders and members of the HHCBC, such as Ha Hai, Truong van Duc, and Nguyen Van Lia, were amnestied during the period covered by this report.

In August 2004, authorities arrested Hong Thien Hank, leader of the small To Dinh Tan Chieu Minh Cao Dai sect in Tien Giang Province. The Government claimed that Hank had engaged in illegal religious activities, printed and distributed religious information without permission, and defrauded believers.

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 Ho Chi Minh City in 1954. In 1988 police surrounded the 15-acre site and arrested all the priests and lay persons inside the compound. With the release in May 2005 of Co-Redemptrix priest Father Pham Minh Tri, only Nguyen Thien Phung remained imprisoned from that episode. His 20-year sentence is due to expire in March 2007.

Cao Dai believer Ngo Van Thong was arrested in 1983 and sentenced to death by a Tay Ninh provincial court; his sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Thong was released in 2001. The Government first reported his release in September 2004.

There were an estimated six religious prisoners and detainees held at the end of the period covered by this report, although the actual number may be higher. This was a significant reduction from the number of religious prisoners cited in the previous report. The number decreased both due to the release of a number of prisoners of concern and due to clarifications by the Government that many individuals who had been alleged by private groups to be held for religious reasons were, in fact, free.

It is difficult to determine the exact number of religious detainees and religious prisoners because 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. Some observers estimate the number of religious prisoners to be much higher, generally as a result of including individuals arrested for participation in "Dega" separatist groups or in the clashes between police and ethnic minority protestors in April 2004. At the end of the period covered by this report, the only person thought to be held without formal arrest or charge for reasons connected to his or her religious belief was Baptist Pastor Than Van Truong, who was being held in a mental asylum in Dong Nai Province.

At least 15 other individuals were held in conditions resembling house arrest for reasons related to the expression of their religious beliefs or attempts to form non-authorized 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: Catholic priest Nguyen Thien Phung, Protestant believer Mua Say So, Cao Dai believer Hong Thien Hank, and Hoa Hao believers Tran Van Hoang, Tran Van Thanh, and Bui Tan Nha. Hoa Hao and Protestant groups alleged a number of other persons were kept in prison for religious reasons, but these claims could not be verified. UBCV monks Thich Tue Sy, Thich Nguyen Ly, Thich Thanh Huyen, and Thich Dong Tho were given 2-year sentences of administrative probation in 2003. Other religious leaders, including UBCV monks Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do and Catholic priest Pham Van Loi, were under de facto house arrest. 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.

Forced Religious Conversion

The implementing decree of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, released on March 1 states that, "Acts to force citizens to follow a religion or renounce their faith... are not allowed." The Prime Minister's Instruction on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism, issued February 4, contained a similarly worded statement. While government officials said that forced conversions or renunciation of faith had always been illegal, these were the first legal documents to state so explicitly. Subsequent to the issuance of the implement decree, religious contacts from the Central and Northwest Highlands reported that attempted forced renunciations were less frequent. Nonetheless, several incidents were reported during the period covered by this report.

On several occasions, local officials in several northwestern villages reportedly attempted to convince or force

Hmong Protestants to recant their faith. Local authorities reportedly also encouraged clan elders to pressure members of their extended families to cease practicing Christianity and to return to traditional practices. For example, four Hmong Protestants from Gap Trung Village, Hoang Su Phi District, Ha Giang Province, were reportedly pressured unsuccessfully by Government border guards to sign documents renouncing their faith in April 2005. Similarly, in May, authorities in Cha Cang Commune, Muong Lay District, Dien Bien Province, reportedly pressured believers from several Protestant house churches to construct traditional altars in their homes, and to sign documents renouncing Protestantism. In July and August 2004, authorities reportedly detained without charge more than 100 Hmong Protestants--choosing 1 member from each Protestant family--in at least 5 different communes in Sapa District, Lao Cai Province. The authorities attempted to force the detainees to renounce Protestantism, releasing them only when they promised to do so.

In the Central Highlands, there were credible reports that local authorities were encouraging ethnic minorities to abandon any affiliation with the "Dega" church and join other Protestant organizations.

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 To Religious Freedom

The status of respect for religious freedom improved during the period covered by this report. Much of the change came through significant revisions to the legal framework governing religion and a lessening of government pressure on Protestant groups. However, at the end of this reporting period, the legal reforms remained in the early stages of implementation.

The Ordinance on Religion and Belief, which came into effect on November 15, 2004, upheld the principle of freedom of religion and belief. While maintaining the basic rule of close government oversight of religious organizations, it relaxed control of annual religious activities and the promotion and transfer of clerics in most cases by requiring that organizations only inform authorities, rather than seek their explicit approval. Further, the ordinance allows religious organizations to conduct charitable activities in education and healthcare, activities that had been highly restricted in the past.

The Implementing Decree for the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, issued March 1, 2005, further defined many facets of government oversight of religion. The decree states that acts to force others to renounce their faith are illegal. By setting forth the specific steps necessary for religious organizations to register as a whole and for congregations to register their activities and meeting places, the decree also gives clarity to processes that previously had been left largely to the discretion of local or provincial officials. Further, the decree stipulates that responses to such applications must come in writing and within a specific timeframe, adding further transparency to the process.

The Prime Minister's "Instruction on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism," issued on February 4, 2005, urges officials to cooperate with Protestant believers and calls upon authorities to facilitate the requests of recognized Protestant denominations to construct churches and train and appoint pastors. Further, the instruction directs authorities to help unrecognized denominations register their congregations so that they can practice openly and move towards fulfilling the criteria required for full recognition. This stipulation effectively allows unrecognized "house churches" to operate so long as they are "committed to follow regulations" and are not affiliated with separatist movements.

Dissemination of these laws was a slow process, and, through the end of the period covered by this report, many leaders of places of worship reported that police and other authorities had not implemented fully these new legal codes. In some cases, officials were not aware of them or had not yet seen them. There were anecdotal reports of police and other government officials approaching house church leaders in some areas to inform them of the new regulations. There were reports from parts of the Northwest Highlands that local officials told believers the new laws did not apply to the Northwest. Subsequent to the release of the March 2005 Implementing Decree, when six different house churches from Ha Giang Province attempted to register with

local authorities, their applications were not accepted. Despite this, many recognized and unrecognized religious groups reported that they believed the situation for their practitioners continued to improve.

In some anecdotal examples, a pastor from Ha Giang Province reported that he oversaw 55 congregations, only 1 of which had difficulties with authorities. While previously his practitioners had been forced to meet in small groups and at unusual hours, they now meet openly and during the daytime, with the full knowledge of authorities. In Hanoi, the Catholic Church noted that its long-standing requests to expand the size of its seminary and frequency of classes both were granted. The SECV reported a number of improvements in the Central Highlands. In Gia Lai Province, the SECV was permitted to open a Bible training school for unrecognized preachers, which will potentially lead to a rapid expansion in the number of new pastors in that province. The SECV also opened nine new churches in Gia Lai Province and seven in Dak Nong Province during the period covered by this report. A number of the congregations in Gia Lai were reportedly provided land by provincial authorities on which to construct new church buildings.

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.

A number of religious prisoners were amnestied or otherwise released from prison during the period covered by this report. Four Hmong Protestants--Vang Chin Sang, Vang Mi Ly, Ly Chin Seng and Ly Xin Quang--from Hoang Su Phi District, Ha Giang Province, who had been sentenced to prison terms from 26 to 36 months in December 2003 after organizing unauthorized religious services, were amnestied in May 2005. Hmong Protestant leader Mua A Chau, who had been detained in Lai Chau Province in March 2003 and sentenced to 36 months in prison for "resisting a person carrying out official duties" after an altercation with police officers, was also amnestied in May 2005. UBCV monk Thich Thien Minh, who had been imprisoned since March 1979, was amnestied in February 2005. He had been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for "activities aimed at overthrowing the people's government," reportedly after protesting the destruction of his temple, and to 10 years' imprisonment after an escape attempt.

Hoa Hao follower Nguyen Van Lia, who had been sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment in October 2003 after holding a commemoration of the disappearance of the Hoa Hao prophet, was amnestied in September 2004. Nguyen Ha Hai, the third-ranking officer of the HHCBC who had been sentenced to 5 years in prison in 2001 for abusing "democratic rights," was released on May 31, 2004, but died of cancer 15 days later. Ho Van Trong, [who had been sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment in May 2001 after a group of 60 to 70 individuals attacked a group of Hoa Hao headed by church leader Le Quang Liem, was](#) released on June 11, 2004. Truong Van Duc, who had been sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment for involvement in the same event, was released in January 2005. Catholic priest Father Nguyen Van Ly, who had been serving a 5-year prison sentence since May 2001 for "damaging the Government's unity policy," was amnestied in May 2005. Also released in May was Catholic Co-Redemptrix priest Father Pham Minh Tri, who had been in prison since 1987.

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 Ho Chi Minh City and Hue, there were some ecumenical dialogues among leaders of disparate religious communities. Buddhists, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai reportedly sometimes cooperate on some social and charitable projects. Various UBCV Buddhists, Catholic, Cao Dai, Protestant, and Hoa Hao activists appeared to network with each other; many of them reportedly formed bonds while serving prison terms at Xuan Loc. On February 15, more than 6,000 people attended an interfaith religious service organized by the Catholic Archdioceses of Ho Chi Minh City to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS. Buddhist, Muslim, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Protestant leaders also spoke at the service as did leading HCMC officials.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In September 2004, the U.S. Secretary of State designated Vietnam a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) for the first time for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Subsequent to this, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, together with the United States Mission in Vietnam, conducted multiple discussions with the Government to urge improvements in religious freedom.

On June 21, 2005, the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Vietnam discussed the status of religious freedom in the country. In early May, the Deputy Secretary of State visited the country and discussed

human rights and religious freedom with high-level government officials.

On May 5, 2005, the United States and Vietnam concluded an agreement that addresses a number of important religious freedom concerns. Under the agreement, the Government made a number of commitments including: to fully implement the new laws on religious activities and to render previous contradictory regulations obsolete; to instruct local authorities to strictly and completely adhere to the new legislation and ensure their compliance; to facilitate the process by which religious congregations are able to open houses of worship, and; to give special consideration to prisoners and cases of concern raised by the United States during the granting of prisoner amnesties. Dependent upon the Government's fulfillment of these commitments, the United States committed to consider the removal of Vietnam from the CPC list.

The Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City 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, Ho Chi Minh City, and the provinces.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and staff traveled to various regions of the country on five occasions between 2003 and 2005 to meet religious leaders and government authorities. During an extended visit to Hanoi in March 2005, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, together with the United States Mission in Vietnam, met with senior government officials from four ministries and conducted discussions about next steps after CPC designation. In these discussions, government officials explained the new, less restrictive legal regime it had put in place to govern religion in the country subsequent to CPC designation. Further, Government officials agreed to detail in writing the measures it was taking to ensure that these laws were being implemented throughout the country.

The National Security Council Senior Director for Asia and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor also raised religious freedom issues with government officials in the country during the period covered by this report. The U.S. Ambassador, the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, 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 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 Ho Chi Minh City, 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 and Consulate General officers repeatedly informed government officials that a lack of progress on religious freedom and human rights was a significant impediment in the bilateral relationship.

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 urged greater freedom for recognized religious groups. The Ambassador and other Mission officers repeatedly advocated ending restrictions on Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do, among others. The Ambassador also requested that the Government investigate alleged abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. They, along with the Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, continued to urge an end to forced renunciations and the punishment of officials involved, and to call for the registration and re-opening of house churches that had been closed.

Representatives of the Embassy and the Consulate General have frequent contact with leaders of major religious communities, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Muslims. In November 2004, the Ambassador met with UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang while he was under conditions resembling house arrest at his pagoda, and in December, he met with UBCV monk Thich Quang Do. Consulate General officers maintained regular contact with these and other UBCV Buddhist monks. Embassy and Consulate General officers met with the cardinal of Ho Chi Minh City, the Catholic archbishops of Hue and Hanoi, and the bishops of Gia Lai, Kontum, Can Tho, Lang Son, Buon Ma Thuot, and Haiphong as well as other members of the Episcopal Conference. 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 Ho Chi Minh City, Embassy and Consulate General officers regularly met with provincial Religious Affairs Committees, village elders, local clergy, and believers.

U.S. Government pressure may have had an immediate impact in some cases of imprisonment for religious reasons. Thirteen individuals raised by the United States as prisoners of concern for reasons connected to their faith were freed by the Government during the period covered by this report. In broader terms, some religious sources have cited diplomatic intervention, primarily from the United States, as a reason why the Government is seeking to legalize more religious groups and is allowing already legalized groups more freedom.

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