



Vietnam

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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 attempts to regulate religious practice through a legal framework, which requires that the Government officially sanction the organization and activities of all religious denominations.

Overall respect for religious freedom improved during the period covered by this report as Vietnam continues its transition from a socialist command economy to an open, market-oriented society; however, a number of positive legal reforms adopted in previous years remained in the early stages of implementation. The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief serves as the primary legal framework governing religious practice. The 2005 implementation decree (number 22) for the ordinance delineates established guidelines for religious denominations to register their activities and seek official recognition. The 2005 "Instruction on Protestantism" promulgated by the prime minister directs officials to assist unrecognized Protestant denominations in registering their activities so that they can practice openly. Under the 2004 ordinance, participation in religious activities throughout the country continued to grow, and Protestant believers in the Central Highlands reported significant improvements in their situation. Furthermore, the Government began to promote registration of Protestant house churches in the Northwest Highlands region, but progress was slow and the Government stated that only six previously unregistered northern congregations were allowed to register their activities during the reporting period.

Despite several confirmed reports of police harassment and beatings of unregistered believers belonging to unrecognized religions, Protestants across the north reported improvement in most officials' attitude towards their religion, and in general Protestants were allowed to gather for worship without significant harassment. Restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of religious groups also remained in place, and the Government maintained a prominent role supervising recognized religions. Religious leaders encountered greatest restrictions when they engaged in activities that the Government perceived as political activism or a challenge to its rule. The Government continued to ban and actively discourage participation in one unrecognized faction of the Hoa Hao Buddhists. The Government also actively restricted the leadership of the unrecognized United Buddhist Church of Vietnam and maintained that it will not recognize this organization under its current leadership. The Catholic Church reported that the Government continued to ease restrictions on church assignment of new clergy but indicated that it would like to open additional seminaries in the North.

During the period covered by this report, the Government released four prominent religious prisoners.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City maintain an active and regular dialogue with senior and working-level government officials to advocate greater religious freedom. U.S. officials also meet and communicate regularly with religious leaders, including religious activists under government scrutiny. The U.S. ambassador and other U.S. officials, including the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, raise concerns about the registration and recognition difficulties faced by religious organizations, the detention and arrest of religious figures, the difficulties Protestants face 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, then secretary of state Colin Powell designated Vietnam a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In November 2005 Secretary of State Rice renewed Vietnam's CPC status but noted significant positive changes in religious freedom during the year. Changes included a May 2005 exchange of letters with the United States 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 83.5 million. The Government officially recognizes one Buddhist organization (Buddhists made 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 (less than 0.1 percent of the population). Other believers belonged to organizations that are not officially recognized by the Government. Most other Vietnamese citizens considered themselves non-religious, although many practiced traditional beliefs such as veneration of ancestors and national heroes.

Buddhism is the dominant religious belief. Many Buddhists practiced an amalgam of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucian traditions that sometimes is called the country's "triple religion." Some estimates suggested that more than half of the population was at least nominally Buddhist. The Committee for Religious Affairs used a much lower estimate of 12 percent (10 million) practicing Buddhists Mahayana Buddhists, most of whom were part of the ethnic Kinh majority and found throughout the country, especially in the populous areas of the northern and southern delta regions. There were proportionately fewer Buddhists in certain highland areas, although migration of Kinh to these areas was changing this distribution. A Khmer ethnic minority in the south practices Theravada Buddhism. Numbering just over 1 million persons, they lived almost exclusively in the Mekong Delta.

There were an estimated 6 to 8 million Roman Catholics in the country, although official government statistics put the number at 5,570,000. Catholics lived throughout the country, but the largest concentrations remained 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 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 claimed as many as four 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 were thirteen separate groups within the Cao Dai religion; the largest was the Tay Ninh sect, which represented more than half of all Cao Dai believers. The Cao Dai religion is syncretistic, combining elements of many faiths. 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. According to the Government, there were 1.6 million Hoa Hao followers; affiliated expatriate groups estimated that there may be up to three million followers. Hoa Hao followers were concentrated in the Mekong Delta, particularly in provinces such as An Giang and Dong Thap, where the Hoa Hao were dominant as a social, political and military force before 1975. The government-recognized Hoa Hao Administrative Committee was organized in 1999. Some Hoa Hao followed other sects that do not have official recognition.

Estimates of the number of Protestants in the country ranged from the official government figure of 500,000 to claims by churches of 1,600,000 or more. The two officially recognized Protestant churches are the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), recognized in 2001, and the smaller Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN), recognized since 1963. The SECV had affiliated churches in all of the southern provinces of the country. There were estimates that the growth of Protestant believers has been as much as 600 percent over the past decade, despite government restrictions on proselytizing activities. Some of these new converts belonged to unregistered evangelical house churches. Based on believers' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants were members of ethnic minorities, including H'mong, Dzao, 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).

Mosques serving the country's small Muslim population, estimated at between 50,000 to 80,000 persons, operated in western An Giang Province, Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and provinces in the southern coastal part of the country. The Muslim community was composed mainly of ethnic Cham, although in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang Province it included some ethnic Vietnamese and migrants originally from Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Approximately half of the Muslims in the country were Sunnis. 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 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. The other half of Muslims practices Bani Islam, a type of Islam unique to the ethnic Cham who live on the central coast of the country. Both groups 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.

There were 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 practiced a devotional form of Hinduism. Another 4,000 Hindus lived in Ho Chi Minh City; some were ethnic Cham but most were Indian or of mixed Indian-Vietnamese descent.

There were 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 said they had good relations with authorities and appeared to be able to practice their faith without significant harassment. At the end of the reporting period, the Baha'i were preparing to apply for registration and recognition under the new legal framework.

There are several hundred members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) who were spread throughout the country but lived primarily in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The Mormon Church HCMC was also preparing to apply for registration under the new legal framework on religion at the end of the reporting period.

At least ten active but unofficially unrecognized congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses were present in the country, each with several hundred members. Most of the congregations were in the south, with five in Ho Chi Minh City. Congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City also applied for registration under the new legal framework during the reporting period.

Fourteen million citizens comprising seventeen percent or more of the population reportedly did not practice any organized religion. Some sources strictly define citizens who are 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 reaching as many as fifty million. No statistics were available on the level of participation in formal religious services, but it was generally acknowledged that this number continued to increase from the early 1990s.

Ethnic minorities constituted approximately 14 percent of the overall population. Ethnic minorities historically have practiced different traditional beliefs than those of the ethnic majority Kinh. Many ethnic minorities, particularly the H'mong, Dzao and Jarai groups, have converted to Catholicism or Protestantism.

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

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The new Ordinance on Religion and Belief came into effect on November 15, 2004. The Ordinance serves as the primary document governing religious practice. 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. Under its provisions, religious denominations must be officially recognized or registered, and the activities and leadership of individual religious congregations must be approved by the appropriate lower-level authorities. The establishment of seminaries and the organization of and enrollment in classes must also 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 also 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 investiture 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.

In February 2005 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 so that they can worship openly and move towards fulfilling the criteria required for full recognition. Addressing the Central and Northwest Highlands, the instruction directs 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 also directs local officials to allow unregistered "house churches" to operate so long as they are "committed to follow regulations" and are not affiliated with separatist political movements.

In March 2005 the Government issued an implementing decree (Decree 22) 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 twenty years of "stable religious operation" in the country in order to be recognized by the Government. It also states that past operation in the country, even prior to registration, can be counted toward the twenty-year requirement. The decree 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.

The national-level Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) is charged with disseminating information about the new legal framework to provincial-, district-, commune-, and village-level authorities and assuring its uniform compliance. Implementation of the new legal framework at lowermost levels of the Government continued to be mixed. However, during the reporting period, national- and provincial-level authorities held a number of training courses for lower-level officials about the new laws to ensure their understanding and compliance with the legal framework. Authorities in some areas actively engaged religious leaders in efforts to implement the changes, particularly the registration of Protestant groups and the reopening of closed churches in the Central Highlands region. Authorities in other areas, particularly in the Northwest Highlands provinces, were less proactive in enforcing the legal changes mandated by the Central Government, although conditions for Protestants in the region generally improved during the reporting period.

The constitutional right of freedom of belief and religion continued to be interpreted and enforced unevenly. In some areas, local officials allowed relatively wide latitude to believers; in other provinces, members of unrecognized religious groups sometimes underwent significant harassment. This was true particularly for Protestants in the Northwest Highlands and in certain rural communities in southern and central regions, including parts of the Central Highlands. During the reporting period, local and provincial authorities in the Northwest Highlands were engaged in discussions with religious leaders and with the central government about registering house churches or recognizing new official congregations; however, only six new Protestant congregations were registered according to the Government, and no new religions were recognized during this reporting cycle.

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 authorities used Article 258 of the penal code to charge persons with practicing religion illegally. This article allowed for jail terms of up to three 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." Examples of such cases were found among the H'mong Protestants in the Northwest Highlands, ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands (sometimes referred to as Montagnard Protestants), and Hoa Hao adherents. In the case of the Central Highlands, officials continued to be concerned that groups inside and outside the country were encouraging the spread of a form of Protestantism that promotes ethnic minority exclusivism and separatism.

Decree 31, 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 two 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. In October 2003 at least four United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) leaders apparently were placed under administrative probation for two-year terms. During the current reporting period, their movement was restricted. For example, in 2006 UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do was prevented from traveling from Ho Chi Minh City to Binh Dinh province to visit the ailing UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang.

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." However, many openly practice traditional ancestor worship, and some visit Buddhist pagodas. 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 all religious groups to register. It 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 believers of these religions do not participate in the government-approved associations.

Implementing Decree 22 clarifies the procedures through which religious organizations and individual religious congregations can seek official recognition. The decree further specifies that the appropriate authorities provide a written response to such request within HCMC: thirty, forty-five, sixty, or ninety 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.

Early in the reporting period, some unrecognized Protestant denominations sought registration under the new legal system governing religion. According to Decree 22, however, a one-year period was required after November 15, 2004 (the effective date of the ordinance) before any new denomination that otherwise fulfills the appropriate criteria could be recognized and these applications were delayed. 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.

Registration requires a congregation to file with relevant provincial authorities information about its structure, leadership, and activities. Authorities then have forty-five days to raise questions or concerns. National-level registrations have a sixty-day consideration period. The CRA must issue a license before an organization is considered registered. The Seventh-day Adventists, Grace Baptist Church, and Mennonite Church of Pastor Nguyen Trung have registered in Ho Chi Minh City under these legal provisions. Additional registrations for the United World Mission Church, the Mormon Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Vietnam Pentecostal Church, and the Presbyterian Relief Organization were pending. More than 500 ECVN congregations out of a reported total of 1,072 unrecognized congregations in the Northwest Highlands applied to register during the reporting period, but only six were granted permission to do so by the end of the reporting period, according to the Government. These six were part of a CRA pilot project to begin registrations in the border provinces of Lai Chau, Lao Cai and Ha Giang. The CRA claimed limited resources forced them to focus on only these three provinces in the initial round of registrations.

Except in limited parts of the Central Highlands and the Northwest Highlands, officially recognized religious organizations were able to operate openly, and followers of these religions were able to worship without harassment. Officially registered and 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 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" like the Vatican is involved, official approval is required in advance.

Because of the lack of due process in the legal system and inconsistent high-level oversight, the actions of religious adherents can be subject to the discretion of local officials in their respective jurisdictions. For example, in certain cases recognized and unrecognized Protestant groups have been able to overcome local harassment or overturn negative local decisions when they have appealed to higher-level authorities. In other cases, this informal appeals process has proven ineffective. In some cases local officials reportedly have told church leaders that national-level laws do not apply to their jurisdictions. There were no reports of punishment of 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, the Government continued to ease limitations compared 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 although enforcement of this ban varied widely.

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 some leaders of the pre-1981 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.

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 two 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. Since October 2003 Thich Quang Do has repeatedly attempted to travel to Quy Nhon Province to visit Thich Huyen Quang. Using various pretexts, government authorities physically prevented Thich Quang Do from doing so and returned him to his pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City under police escort. However, Thich Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang were able to receive visits from foreign diplomats. Thich Quang Do was able to see other UBCV members on occasion during the period covered by this report. Thich Quang Do and some other UBCV leaders also have been able to maintain contact with associates overseas.

The Government technically maintains veto power over Vatican appointments of bishops; however, in practice it has cooperated with the Catholic Church in nominations for appointment. The Church operates six seminaries in the country with more than 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 believed that the number of students being ordained was insufficient to support the growing Catholic population and has indicated it would like to open additional seminaries and enroll new classes more frequently. The Church has had an application pending for five years to open a new seminary in Dong Nai Province, but approval remained pending.

The practice of Protestantism remained a sensitive issue in the Central Highlands provinces. The Government is concerned that some ethnic minority groups operating in this region have been operating a self-styled "Dega Church," which reportedly mixes religious practice with political activism and calls for ethnic minority separatism.

Despite improved conditions over the reporting period, SECV and house churches in the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Dak Nong continue to be under close government scrutiny. In 2001 the Government ordered all Protestant congregations affiliated with the SECV--numbering at least one thousand--to close. Most of these have been allowed to reopen and operate. However, at least one third of SECV congregations closed in 2001 in the province of Dak Lak were unable to operate and worshipers ordered to pray at home in private. A number of unrecognized Protestant house church organizations including the Baptists, Presbyterians, and United World Mission Church also operated in the Central Highlands. These groups reported substantially improved conditions for their congregations, although some incidents of local police harassment continued to occur.

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.

There are more than 120,000 Protestants in the northern part of the country and the Northwest Highlands 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. More than 500 ECVN congregations applied to register during the reporting period; however, most applications were either rejected outright, ignored or returned unopened. The Government asserts that six pilot registrations were allowed in June and July in Lai Chau, Lao Cai, and Ha Giang Provinces, but this could not be independently confirmed.

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 dating back to French colonial rule. 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 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, its members faced significant official pressure. Two members of the HHCBC, Tran Van Thang and Tran Van Hoang, were arrested on February 25, 2005, and sentenced to six and nine months' imprisonment respectively for unauthorized distribution of audio cassettes and DVDs containing teachings of HHCBC leaders. A June 2005 commemoration of Foundation Day led to clashes between police and activists who were protesting Government control of the Hoa Hao faith. Some Hoa Hao activists continued to encourage self-immolation of their followers to protest government repression. In September 2005 two Hoa Hao activists self-immolated when police attempted to arrest them for their involvement in the June clashes, resulting in the death of one activist. Seven activists were arrested, tried, and given prison terms ranging from four to seven years. In August 2005 a Hoa Hao activist attempted to self-immolate in front of the U.S. consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City but was stopped by consulate guards and local police. Frictions between some Hoa Hao activists and government officials in the Mekong Delta continued to flare throughout the reporting period.

There are six different officially recognized branches of the Cao Dai Church in the southern part of the country, 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.

There are no formal prohibitions on changing one's religion. 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. There have been some reports that some local officials in rural communities continue to discourage conversion to Protestantism by threatening converts that they will lose education and social welfare allowances.

The Government controls and monitors all forms of public assembly, including assembly for religious activities; however, during the reporting period, some large religious gatherings were allowed.

Article 35 of Decree 22 requires government approval for foreign missionary groups to proselytize. Such activities should take place under the sponsorship of a national or local religious organization. It discourages public proselytizing outside of recognized worship centers, including by citizens. Some missionaries visited the country despite this official prohibition and carried on informal proselytizing activities.

The HCMC-based New Life Fellowship Church (NLF), which catered to both foreigners and citizens and is headed by a foreign missionary, was prevented from gathering in HCMC hotels in August 2005 after it launched a separate service for local citizens in contravention to the law. Since then, foreigners in the NLF have been able to gather in small groups at home. In April 2006 the NLF was able to hold its first large prayer meeting for foreigners on the grounds of a HCMC hotel for foreigners since August 2005. The NLF remained in discussion with city- and national-level officials to find a permanent, legal solution to its status.

Government policy does not permit persons who belong to unofficial religious groups to speak publicly about their beliefs, but some continued 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. For example, Baptists in Bac Giang Province near Hanoi were prevented from proselytizing within their community by local officials during the reporting period, despite the apparent legality of their organization, because the religion was introduced to the province by pastors from the south.

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 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 Christian Bible is printed in Vietnamese, Chinese, and English, but not in ethnic minority languages. Some Protestant house church groups have had Bibles or other religious materials that were printed abroad seized by authorities on the grounds that any "foreign language" material that has not been explicitly authorized by the Government is illegal. CRA officials could not confirm if any ethnic minority texts published abroad have been so authorized. Seizures of ethnic language bibles are particularly acute among ethnic minority church groups in some Northwest Highlands provinces.

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. For example, one Protestant house church leader had his passport seized by government authorities in 2004. However, other unofficial leaders travel internationally on a regular basis. Religious persons who traveled abroad in the past were sometimes questioned about their activities upon their return and required to surrender their passports; however, this practice appeared 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. 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. 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.

Contacts between some unregistered Protestant organizations and their foreign supporters are discouraged but occur regularly, including training and the provision of financial support and religious materials. The Government is particularly concerned about contact between separatist "Dega" Protestants in the Central Highlands and overseas supporters. The Government regards Dega Protestants as a group that uses religion as a rallying point to encourage ethnic minority separatism, political unrest, and the establishment of an independent ethnic minority state.

Adherence to a religious faith generally does not disadvantage persons in nongovernment 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 3.1 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. CPV and Government officials routinely visit 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 notification of authorities, a relaxation on previous regulations.

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, Protestant, Muslim, and Buddhist groups are allowed to provide religious education to children. 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. Religious groups are not permitted to operate independent schools beyond preschool and kindergarten.

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 following the reunification of the country in 1975. 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 small number of previously confiscated properties but had 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 and hospitals that were incorporated into the state 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 was involved in supporting HIV/AIDS hospices and treatment centers and providing counseling to young persons. Buddhist groups also were involved in HIV/AIDS and other charitable work across the country. The Ho Chi Minh City archdiocese ran the HIV/AIDS clinic at the Trong Diem drug rehabilitation center on behalf of the city government. The city government and the Catholic Church were in discussion about how to officially sanction new initiatives, such as a walk-in clinic for possible HIV/AIDS victims, although it allowed the Church to pursue these initiatives quietly. Charitable activities by the Catholic Church were much more restricted in northern Vietnam.

The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha engaged in humanitarian activities, including antidrug 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.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Reports of abuses of religious freedom diminished during the period covered by this report; however, some religious believers continued to experience harassment or repression because they operated without legal sanction. Local officials repressed Protestant believers in some parts of 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. In one instance, in June 2006 in Thanh Hoa Province two Protestants were beaten by local police. However, the number of credible reports of such incidents was lower compared with previous years and largely seemed to reflect individual bias at the local level rather than official policy in most cases. Restrictions on UBCV leaders remained in place, with much of the leadership's freedom of movement, expression, and assembly limited. There were fewer 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.

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. Pastor Chinh is affiliated with the Mennonite church of Pastor Quang. 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 another 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.

Pastor and house church leader Nguyen Hong Quang imprisoned in 2004 and sentenced to a three-year prison term, was released in September 2005 in an amnesty. Five of his followers were sentenced to between nine months and two 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 believed to be plain clothed police officers monitoring his residence; however, some observers connected Quang's arrest to his broader social activism. Ho Chi Minh City police regularly targeted Pastor Quang's Mennonite house church for harassment when the church was led by his wife Le Thi Phu Dzung during the period of Pastor Quang's imprisonment. Police called Mrs. Dzung in for questioning on several occasions, disrupted church services, and detained groups of followers for short periods. In May 2006, Pastor Quang and some followers were detained for nearly twenty-four hours following a confrontation with local police over new construction at Pastor Quang's house, which also served as a local house church. However, the Government's claim that Pastor Quang willfully ignored zoning regulations and local officials' orders to comply with zoning regulations was supported by some evidence.

Baptist pastor Than Van Truong was released in September 2005 after spending one year involuntarily committed to a mental asylum by authorities in Dong Nai Province as punishment for his religious and political beliefs. He was reportedly released on the condition that he sign a document certifying his mental illness, making him subject to readmission to a mental institution should he "relapse." Pastor Truong continued to be closely monitored by local officials. There were confirmed reports that he continued to be harassed and his religious activities curtailed in Dong Nai and in his home village in Bac Giang Province in northern Vietnam where he has helped organize a small church. In June 2006 diplomats were permitted by the Government to visit the Bac Giang church and to investigate allegations of harassment with local officials.

In May 2005, 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 were 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." According to religious leaders, a house church in Tra Vinh Province in the Mekong Delta was prevented from holding Easter services in 2006. Bibles and other religious materials were confiscated. In December 2005 police interrupted Christmas services of some house churches in Can Tho, Long An and Vinh Long provinces, also in the Mekong Delta. In Kien Giang in January 2006, police banned the gathering of a house church affiliated with the Methodist community and confiscated the identification of a visiting pastor.

In August 2005 there were credible reports that local officials attempted to force an SECV lay preacher to renounce his faith and stop his ministry in the ethnic minority Hre village in Quang Ngai Province. Unidentified parties reportedly burned his house down in retaliation. The small Protestant community continued to face harassment through May 2006.

During the reporting period there were fewer reports of leaders of nonregistered churches in the Northwest Highlands being harassed or detained and pressured to renounce their faith.

House churches are frequently tolerated in some places, although their unofficial status often leaves them at the whim 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.

The dissemination of laws regarding the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, the Implementing Decree for the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, and the prime minister's Instruction on Protestantism have remained 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 legal codes. However, central- and provincial-level authorities have conducted at least some training sessions to educate local officials on the legal framework. Implementation of the new legal framework has been particularly slow in the Northern and Northwest Highlands provinces, particularly with regard to Protestants, and local officials often used legal pretexts to harass church members and leaders. This harassment diminished somewhat over the course of the reporting period, particularly after January 2006.

Protestants in Bao Thang District of Lao Cai Province have not been allowed to celebrate Christmas since 1990. In 2005 they were required to seek permission from local authorities for their Christmas celebrations, but just before the holiday, local authorities ordered the congregation to take down all decorations. Around the same time, two deacons in Bat Xat District of Lao Cai who traveled to Hanoi were given significant fines as were two deacons from Phung Phong Hai Town in the same district who acquired application forms from the ECVN. The two were arrested on their return from Hanoi and held for sixteen days.

Credible reports indicated that officials in Bac Ha District of Lao Cai Province refused to forward the local congregation's registration application to higher officials. The officials have also encouraged non-Protestant relatives to harass believers until they give up their religion. In one case, police refused to intervene when the brother of a Protestant woman repeatedly beat her husband, hinting that, 'since you are Protestant, it is okay for him to beat your husband until he and you renounce your faith.' A house church deacon in Muon Nghe District in Dien Bien was arrested in November 2005 after he returned to the district from Hanoi carrying ECVN documents. Officials of the Border Protection Force (BPF) justified his arrest by saying that "he was not allowed to travel that far to get documents from the ECVN" even if he asked permission first. Since this event, a special task force of BPF personnel has been living in Protestant villages to watch villager activities and to confiscate all H'mong language bibles they find. In August 2005, district-level government in the province of Phu Yen turned down the registration application of a Baptist congregation, claiming that the house church is "Vietnamese-American" and did not meet legal requirements. It was unclear whether the decision was appealed.

In January 2006 in Xin Man District of Ha Giang, district-level authorities told an unregistered congregation that, "if five or more of your members gather together, we will prosecute you." The group submitted an application to register but has not received any official response to their request. In March 2006 in Vi Xuyen District of Ha Giang Province, local authorities fined a house church pastor \$32 (VND 500,000), or more than half of his monthly salary, for traveling to Hanoi to pick up registration forms from the ECVN. In addition, lay deacons of the church were fined VND \$6 (VND 100,000) each for "being Protestant" and for signing documents requesting registration for their group.

There were reports from parts of the Northwest Highlands that local officials told believers the new laws did not apply to the Northwest. Although reportedly 535 house churches in the Northwest Highlands applied to register, only 6 were allowed to do so by the end of the reporting period according to the Government.

Despite significant improvements in the Central Highlands, at least one third of SECV congregations in Dak Lak faced significant restrictions on operations. Conditions appeared even more restrictive in Sa Thay district in Kontum Province, where senior district-level officials in early 2006 argued that there was "no religion" in the area. There were some anecdotal reports that in some areas local police officials were rebuked for harassing house churches in contravention of the prime minister's Instruction on Protestantism. In a few incidents in the Mekong Delta and in central regions, local authorities reportedly increased harassment of groups that submitted applications to register.

The repression of Protestantism in the Central Highlands is complicated by the presence of "Dega" separatists, who advocate an autonomous or independent homeland for the indigenous persons who live in the area, particularly in Gia Lai, Dak Nong and Dak Lak provinces. These separatists reportedly have links to political advocacy groups residing in the United States. The relationship between the Dega movement and Protestant believers belonging to the SECV is tense in some parts of the Central Highlands. Dega activists reportedly have threatened that SECV pastors would not be allowed to serve in a "Dega State" unless they abandon the SECV. Other Protestant pastors have accused the Dega movement of manipulating religion for political purposes. We cannot estimate the extent of support in the Central Highlands for the Dega Church, but it remained an issue of significant concern for central and provincial governments.

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 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 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. Since April 2004 there have been no new large-scale protests in the Central Highlands and the Government has taken some additional steps in an attempt to improve socioeconomic and religious freedom conditions for the ethnic minority community.

It was difficult to determine the exact number of religious detainees and religious prisoners because there was little transparency in the justice system, and it was very difficult to obtain confirmation of when persons were detained, imprisoned, tried, or released. The Government claimed that it did not hold any religious prisoners; such persons were usually convicted of violating national security laws or general criminal laws. Some observers estimate a high number of religious prisoners, generally as a result of including individuals arrested for participation in "Dega" groups or in the clashes between police and ethnic minority protestors in February 2001 and April 2004.

In August 2005 Vo Van Thanh Liem, Nguyen Phi Long, Nguyen Van Dien, Mai Thi Dung, Vo Van Buu, Tran Thanh Phong, Nguyen Thi Ha, Mai Van Thung and To Van Man were arrested in coordinated raids across the Mekong Delta. Vo Van Buu attempted self-immolation but survived. His colleague Tan Van Ut committed self-immolation and died during the police raid. Police accused the ten individuals of playing key roles in a June 2005 protest and clash with police following a religious event organized by the HHCBC. In trials in the Mekong Delta, seven of the nine received sentences ranging from four to seven years. It appeared that Nguyen Phi Long and Mai Van Thung were not tried or convicted.

Ma Van Bay, a Protestant church leader, was sentenced to six years imprisonment in April 2004. He was charged with theft after collecting voluntary donations for church use.

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 nine and six 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 HHCBC. The two individuals reportedly were released at the expiry of their prison terms.

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

At least fifteen individuals, including UBCV monks Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and Catholic priest Pham Van Loi, 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. 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, 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 contains 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. Religious contacts from the Central and Northwest Highlands reported that attempted forced renunciations continued to decrease. Nonetheless, several incidents were reported during the period covered by this report.

According to a number of credible sources, on several occasions, local officials in several northwestern villages attempted to convince or force H'mong Protestants to recant their faith. Local authorities also encouraged clan elders to pressure members of their extended families to cease practicing Christianity and to return to traditional practices. For example, in July and August 2004, authorities reportedly detained without charge more than 100 H'mong 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. During the reporting period there were no credible reports of such attempted forced renunciations in the Sapa area, although some believers claimed that local authorities attempted to revoke land title from Protestants who refused to renounce their faith. Four H'mong 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 2006, 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.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The status of respect for religious freedom improved during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to ease limitations on restrictions placed upon Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Hoa Hoa, and Cao Dai compared to previous years. Much of the change came from implementation of significant revisions to the legal framework governing religion instituted in 2004 and 2005 and a lessening of government pressure on Protestant groups. At the end of this reporting period, the legal reforms remained in the early stages of implementation. Nevertheless, many recognized and unrecognized religious groups, especially Protestant groups in the Central and Northwest Highlands regions, reported that they believed the situation for their practitioners continued to improve overall.

The Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism also instructed officials in the Central Highlands to continue to recognize new chapters of the SECV. During the period covered by this report, the SECV and house churches generally reported improved conditions in the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Dak Nong. At least fifteen new Protestant SECV congregations in the Central Highlands have been recognized in the period covered by this report.

Most SECV congregations and meeting places in the Central Highlands were able to register their activities with local officials and allowed to operate without significant harassment. For example, hundreds of places of worship were allowed to operate in Gia Lai, effectively legalizing operations for 75,000 believers in the province. The SECV also opened a number of new churches in Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Dak Nong Provinces. In addition, the SECV continued to conduct Bible classes in these provinces to provide training to some house church preachers in the region, allowing them to receive formal recognition as pastors. Ordination of new pastors is a key step in the formal recognition of additional SECV churches. During the reporting period, Gia Lai Province also permitted the SECV to open a Bible training school for unrecognized preachers, which could potentially lead to an even more rapid expansion of the number of new pastors in that province and hence open the way for further registrations. Gia Lai authorities also facilitated the construction of a new SECV church in Chu Se District. In May 2006, 266 leaders attended a session in Hue conducted by the CRA that explained the registration process, and another 300 attended a similar conference in Ho Chi Minh City.

Unlike in previous years, officials in most of the northern provinces acknowledged the presence of Protestants, and said that, in keeping with the Government's instructions, they planned to expedite registration of some congregations. ECVN contacts in the Northwest confirmed that most unregistered congregations were generally allowed to worship in their homes and to meet openly and

during the daytime, with the full knowledge of authorities. In general, provincial authorities suggested that Protestants would be allowed to organize and gather in small groups for the time being without receiving legal registration. For example, in Quang Ninh Province, officials tolerated the activities of local Protestants so long as they did not gather in large groups and indicated that if the local congregation "continues to behave" for one year's time, the provincial authorities would grant them permission to register.

Police and other government officials in the Northwest Highlands worked with house church leaders in some areas to inform them of the new regulations and six previously unregistered ECVN house churches--two in Lai Chau Province and four in Lao Cai province--were officially registered according to the CRA. The CRA conducted training sessions across the north to educate provincial and district officials about the new religious regulations so that they would "implement these policies in an orderly fashion." More than 300 local officials attended these training classes in Hanoi and Hue. The CRA also conducted training seminars for religious leaders. In April 2006, 247 clergy participants from various religious groups attended a seminar in Hanoi conducted by the CRA that explained the registration process.

Many pastors of Protestant denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Baptists, and Assemblies of God do not wish to join the SECV or ECVN 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 Pastor Le Hong Quang, as a rule the level of official harassment of unrecognized house churches from non-SECV and ECVN denominations continued to decline across the country. The Government held discussions about registration and recognition with leaders of at least four Protestant denominations and the Jehovah's Witnesses. At the end of the reporting period, one subgroup each of the Mennonite church, the Seventh-day Adventists, and the Grace Baptist Church had been registered in Ho Chi Minh City. National registration for these groups, as well as the United World Mission Church based in Danang, has been pending since September 2005.

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, and restrictions on church services for Protestants continued to diminish. Catholics across Vietnam were allowed to celebrate Christmas and Easter without significant difficulties. Some Protestants in the Central Highlands and in the north had difficulty celebrating at Christmastime but reported that they were allowed to celebrate Easter without much difficulty.

The Catholic Church reported continued easing of government control over church assignment of new clergy, and, during the reporting period, many new priests were ordained, including fifty-seven ordained in a ceremony conducted by a visiting Vatican Cardinal in November 2005. Most of these new priests took up their assignments in provincial benefices by the end of the reporting period. All bishoprics remained filled, and in late 2005, the Government facilitated a request to create a new diocese in the South and to consecrate a new bishop. Contact between Vatican authorities and the country's Catholics remained routine, and the Government maintained its regular, active dialogue with the Vatican on a range of issues, including Church leadership, organizational activities, and the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations. Negotiations on the establishment of diplomatic ties between the Vatican and the Government continued to increase in intensity during the reporting period.

Official harassment against Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang's Mennonite church in Ho Chi Minh City subsided substantially following the pastor's amnesty and release from prison in September 2005. In late May 2006 Pastor Quang was invited to a first-ever government seminar for house church organizations on the new legal framework on religion.

The HCMC-based New Life Fellowship Church, which catered to both foreigners and local Vietnamese, was prevented from gathering in HCMC hotels in August 2005 after it launched a separate service for citizens in contravention to the law. Since then, foreigners in the NLF have been able to gather in small groups at home. In April 2006 the NLF was able to hold its first large prayer meeting for foreigners on the grounds of a HCMC hotel for foreigners since August 2005. The NLF remains in discussion with city- and national-level officials to find a permanent, legal solution to its status.

Adherents of the Muslim Association of Vietnam continued to be able to practice their faith, including reciting 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 Muslim community did not report any problems or difficulties with the Government.

France-based Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh was permitted to return to the country in January 2005 for a ten-week trip, his first after thirty-nine 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. Thich Nhat Hanh was able to meet with UBCV leaders in Hue but not in Ho Chi Minh City.

During the reporting period, some religious groups were also allowed to convene large religious gatherings, 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, each with attendance estimated in the hundreds of thousands. House church Protestants were able to gather in large groups for special worship services in Ho Chi Minh City and elsewhere. In April 2006 the HCMC government officially sanctioned the first large revival meeting for the Baptist house church community since 1975. Other house church leaders and government officials also attended the revival.

A number of religious prisoners were amnestied or otherwise released from prison during the period covered by this report. For instance, Brother Nguyen Thien Phung, a member of the Order of the Mother Co-Redemptrix, Tran Van Hoang, Tran Van Thanh,

and Than Van Truong were amnestied September 2, 2005.

Catholic and Protestant groups reported that the Government continued to restore some previously owned properties, although progress on outstanding claims was generally very slow. For example, in January 2006 an ECVN congregation (one of fifteen legal congregations in the North registered since the mid-1960s) was given title to a church property in Thanh Hoa that had stood derelict for several decades. The congregation was also given permission to remodel the church and build a house for their pastor.

The Government continued to publicize its new policy of religious tolerance through the organs of the state. For example, in May 2006 the CRA trained more than 600 provincial propaganda cadres from Northwest Highlands provinces to disseminate information on religion to the common people to reduce societal tensions arising between followers of traditional ethnic minority beliefs and Protestant converts.

In all, during the reporting period, the Government continued to address many concerns raised by the United States and other nations concerning religious freedom. Uneven approaches to implementation at the local level appeared to be the largest difficulty faced by the Government in enforcing its new religious regulations, though the CRA took steps to improve local officials' understanding of the laws on Protestant registration and other new policies.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

In general, there are amicable relations among the various religious groups 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In September 2004 the 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 diplomatic mission in Vietnam, conducted multiple discussions with the Government to urge improvements in religious freedom. Senior U.S. officials and the Government worked closely together, resulting in an exchange of letters in May 2005 that covered the following issues: full implementation of the new laws on religious activities; instruction of local authorities to strictly and completely adhere to the new legislation and ensure it compliance; facilitation of the process by which religious congregations are able to open houses of worship; and special consideration to prisoners and cases of concern raised by the United States during the granting of prisoner amnesties.

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 November 2005 the secretary of state renewed Vietnam's CPC status but noted significant improvement in religious freedom during the year.

In February 2006 the U.S. Department of State's assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, and the ambassador at large for international religious freedom traveled to Hanoi to resume the bilateral U.S./Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue.

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 mission also maintained regular contact with religious leaders and dissidents.

The ambassador at large for international religious freedom and staff traveled to various regions of the country on six occasions between 2003 and 2006 to meet religious leaders and government authorities. During an extended visit to Hanoi in February 2006 on the margins of the bilateral Human Rights Dialogue, the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, together with officials of the United States Mission in Vietnam, met with senior government officials from four ministries for continued discussions on a variety of religious freedom issues.

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, the 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 to an improved 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 international religious freedom and the assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, continued to urge an end to forced renunciations and the punishment of officials involved, ask for the release of religious and political prisoners, and 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 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 Dak Lak, Gia Lai, and 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.

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