

Vietnam

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of worship; however, government restrictions remained on the organized activities of religious groups.

Respect for religious freedom and practice continued to experience improvements during the reporting period. The Government deepened implementation of its 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and supplemental decrees on religious policy issued in 2005 (referred to collectively as the Government's "legal framework on religion"). New congregations were registered in many of the country's 64 provinces, a number of religious groups were registered at the national level, and citizens were generally allowed to practice religion more freely. The Catholic Church, various Protestant congregations, and other smaller religious groups reported that their ability to gather and worship improved and that the Government generally eased restrictions on assignment of new clergy. The Catholic Church reported that the Government approved the establishment of one additional Catholic seminary.

Despite progress during the reporting period, problems remained with the implementation of the legal framework on religion, primarily at the provincial and village level. These included slowness, and in some cases inaction, in the registration of Protestant congregations in the north and the Northwest Highlands; inconsistent application of procedures for congregation registration and other legal requirements; restrictions on religious recruitment; and difficulties in the establishment of Protestant pastor training courses. Some provincial authorities were more active, while others appeared not to consider positive and consistent implementation of the legal framework on religion as a priority.

The Government remained concerned that some ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands were operating a self-styled "Dega Church," which reportedly mixes religious practice with political activism and calls for ethnic minority separatism. The Government also restricted the leadership of the unrecognized Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and maintained that it would not recognize this organization under its current leadership. The Government maintained a prominent role overseeing recognized religions. Religious groups encountered the 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 discourage participation in one unrecognized faction of the Hoa Hao Buddhists. Government authorities imprisoned a former Khmer Buddhist monk for his alleged involvement in organizing land rights protests in the Mekong Delta in 2007.

Nevertheless, overall respect for religious freedom improved during the period covered by this report. Participation in religious activities throughout the country continued to grow, and Protestants in the Central Highlands continued to report significant improvements in their situation. The Government continued to register Protestant house churches and meeting points across the country; however, hundreds of applications remained pending, especially in the Northwest Highlands.

During the reporting period, the Government granted national recognition to two Protestant denominations--United World Mission Church and Grace Baptist Church--and one additional religion, the Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice. Also during the reporting period, the Government granted national registration certificates to 4 additional Protestant denominations, as well as two additional religious groups: The Threefold Enlightened Truth Path and The Threefold Southern Tradition. During the reporting period, the national level Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) and some of its provincial representatives were active in resolving religion-related problems and concerns. Protestants and Catholics across the north reported improvement in most officials' attitude towards their religion, and in general Protestants and Catholics were allowed to gather for worship without harassment, despite some isolated incidents.

There were few instances of societal violence based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period. In October 2007 a group of Protestants in Tra Vinh Province reported they were beaten by an estimated 50 ethnic Khmer residents and their house church was vandalized. When called to the commune police station the same day, they were allegedly beaten again by a group of approximately 200 locals in the presence of a Khmer monk and local authorities. Also, many Catholics and Protestants reported that Christians are not considered for senior government positions as a result of unofficial discrimination within the Government.

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City maintained regular dialogue with senior and working-level government officials to advocate greater religious freedom. U.S. officials also met and communicated 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, raised concerns about the registration and recognition difficulties faced by religious organizations, the difficulties Protestants faced 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, senior provincial officials, and others. Both President Bush and Secretary of State Rice, in meetings with their counterparts during the reporting period, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Religious freedom was also covered in the 2008 U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 127,000 square miles and a population of 83.5 million. Some estimates suggest that more than half of the population is at least nominally Buddhist. The Roman Catholic Church comprises 8 to 10 percent, several Cao Dai organizations comprise 1.5 to 3 percent, the primary Hoa Hao organization 1.5 to 4

percent, Protestant denominations 0.5 to 2 percent, and one Muslim organization less than 0.1 percent of the population. Most other citizens consider themselves nonreligious, although many practice traditional beliefs such as veneration of ancestors and national heroes.

Many Buddhists practice an amalgam of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism that is sometimes called the "triple religion." The CRA cited an estimate of 10 million (12 percent of the population) practicing Mahayana Buddhists, most of whom are members of the ethnic Kinh majority and 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 this distribution. A Khmer ethnic minority in southern Vietnam practices Theravada Buddhism. Numbering more than 1 million, they live almost exclusively in the Mekong Delta. In 1981 the officially sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) was established. The Government does not recognize the legitimacy of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV).

There are an estimated 8 million Catholics in the country, although government statistics place the number at 5.9 million. 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 in recent years, with newly rebuilt or renovated churches and growing numbers of people who want to be religious workers.

Government statistics put the number of Cao Dai at 2.3 million, although Cao Dai officials routinely claim as many as 5 million adherents. Cao Dai groups are most active in Tay Ninh Province, where the Cao Dai "Holy See" is located, in Ho Chi Minh City, and throughout the Mekong Delta. There are many separate groups within the Cao Dai religion; the largest is the Tay Ninh sect, which represents more than half of all Cao Dai believers. Cao Dai is syncretistic, combining elements of many faiths.

According to the Government, there are 1.2 million Hoa Hao followers; affiliated expatriate groups estimate that there may be up to 3 million adherents. Hoa Hao followers are 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 (HHAC) was organized in 1999. Some Hoa Hao belong to other sects that oppose the HHAC.

The two largest officially recognized Protestant churches are the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV or ECVN-S) and the smaller Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN). The Grace Baptist Church and the United World Mission are also officially recognized. A growing number of other Protestant denominations are also present, including the Vietnam Mennonite Church, the Vietnam Presbyterian Church, and the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church (all officially registered), as well as others yet to be registered. Estimates of the number of Protestants ranged from government figures of 610,000 to claims by churches of more than 1.6 million. There were estimates that the growth of Protestant believers has been as much as 600 percent over the past decade. Some new converts belong to unregistered evangelical

house churches. Based on adherents' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including minority groups in the Northwest Highlands (H'mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, and Mnong, among others).

Mosques serving the small Muslim population, estimated at between 50,000 to 80,000 people, operate in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, western An Giang Province, and provinces in the southern coastal area. The Government officially estimates there are 67,000 Muslim believers. The Muslim community is composed mainly of ethnic Cham, although in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang Province it includes some ethnic Kinh and migrants originally from Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Approximately half of the Muslims are Sunnis; the other half practice Bani Islam, a type of Islam unique to the ethnic Cham who live on the south-central coast.

There are several smaller religious communities, the largest of which is the Hindu community. Approximately 50,000 ethnic Cham in the south-central coastal area practice a devotional form of Hinduism. 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 Baha'is, largely concentrated in the south. While Baha'i followers were present prior to 1975, open practice of the Baha'i faith was banned from 1975 to 1992, and the number of believers dropped sharply during this time.

There are approximately 800 hundred members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) throughout the country, but primarily in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

At least ten active but unregistered congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses operate in the country, each reportedly with several hundred members. Most of the congregations are in the south, with five in Ho Chi Minh City.

There is one Jewish temple in Ho Chi Minh City. While its members are primarily foreign national expatriates, the congregation is growing.

At least 14 million citizens constituting 17 percent or more of the population reportedly do not practice any organized religion. Other sources strictly define those whose activities are limited to visiting pagodas on ceremonial holidays to not be practicing Buddhists. Using this stricter definition, the number of nonreligious people in the country would be much higher, perhaps as many as 50 million. No statistics were available on the level of participation in formal religious services, but it was generally acknowledged that this number has been increasing since the early 1990s.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14 percent of the population. They historically practice different traditional beliefs than those of the majority Kinh. Many ethnic minorities, particularly among the H'mong, Dao, and Jarai groups in the Northwest and Central Highlands, have converted to Protestantism.

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. The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief serves as the primary document governing religious practice. It reiterates citizens' rights to freedom of belief, freedom of religion, and freedom not to follow a religion, and it affirms that violations of these freedoms are prohibited. However, it states that the "abuse" of freedom of belief or religion "to undermine the country's peace, independence, and unity" is illegal and also 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 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 explicitly bans forced renunciation of faith. The ordinance also relaxes government oversight of religion to some extent. For example, religious organizations are required only 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 health care and education, which were limited in the past.

In February 2005, the Prime Minister issued the "Instruction on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism," which calls on authorities to facilitate the requests of recognized Protestant denominations to construct churches and to 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. The Instruction directs authorities in the Central and Northwest Highlands to help groups of Protestants 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 an implementing decree (Decree 22) provided further guidance on the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. It delineated specific procedures by which an unrecognized religious organization could register its places of worship, its clerics, and its activities and thus operate openly. It further provided procedures for these groups to apply for official recognition from the Government to gain additional rights. The decree specified that a religious organization must have 20 years of "stable religious operation" in the country in order to be recognized by the Government and stated that past operation in the country can be counted toward this requirement. The decree further set 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 rejected application.

Decree 22 also clarified the procedures through which religious organizations and individual congregations could seek official recognition. 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. To obtain official recognition, a denomination must first receive national-level registration. According to the legal framework, a religious organization must pass through several legal stages to receive national-level registration. First, the religious organization must apply for and receive registration in each local administrative area in which it operates. Registration requires a religious organization to file information with relevant authorities about its structure, leadership, and activities. Authorities then have 45 days to raise questions or concerns. National-level registrations have a 60-day consideration period. The CRA must issue a license before an organization is considered registered. After maintaining national registration for one year, the eligible religious group can apply for full legal recognition and must receive government approval of its leadership, structure, and activities.

Decree 22 further specified that appropriate authorities must provide a written response to requests for official recognition within 30, 45, 60, or 90 days, depending on the scope of the request. Government officials rarely adhered to these response times in practice. In the case of a refusal, a specific reason must be included in the written response, although this requirement also did not appear to be adhered to systematically. There is no specific mechanism for appeal in the ordinance, nor are the reasons for denying a request restricted in any way.

The national-level CRA is charged with disseminating information about the new legal framework to authorities at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels and assuring uniform compliance. Implementation of the legal framework at lower levels of the Government continued to be mixed. During the reporting period, national and provincial authorities held a number of training courses for lower-level officials about the new laws to 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. Some authorities in other areas, particularly in some parts of the Central Highlands, the Mekong Delta, as well as the northern border area and Northwest Highlands, were less active in enforcing the legal changes mandated by the central Government, although conditions for Protestants generally improved throughout the country during the reporting period.

The Government does not officially favor a particular religion. Virtually all senior government and CPV officials, as well as the vast majority of National Assembly delegates, are formally "without religion." However, many party and government officials openly practice traditional ancestor worship, and some visit Buddhist pagodas. The prominent traditional position of Buddhism does not adversely affect religious freedom for others, including those who do not practice a religion.

The Government officially recognizes Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Baha'i, Muslim, and Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice. Individual congregations within each registered or recognized group established after the legal framework took effect must also be registered. Practitioners of alternative Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai groups do not participate in the government-recognized/registered religious organizations.

As of the end of the reporting period, the Government reported that it had recognized a total of 19 religions organizations affiliated with 7 recognized religions (Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice). The Government has also granted national registration to ten religious organizations--five distinct religious groups and five Protestant denominations.

The Government does not observe any religious national holidays.

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 Communist Party 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. Atheism is not officially taught in schools.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government requires the registration of all activities by religious groups and uses this requirement to ban and actively discourage participation in certain unrecognized religious groups, including the outlawed UBCV and some Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai groups.

The Government continued to oppose efforts by the UBCV to operate and continued to restrict the movement of UBCV leaders. Thich Quang Do, Thich Huyen Quang, and other UBCV leaders were able to receive visits from foreign diplomats. On occasion Thich Quang Do was able to see other UBCV members during the period covered by this report. Thich Quang Do and some other UBCV leaders also were able to maintain contact with associates overseas. However, provincial leaders of the UBCV throughout the southern region reported routine surveillance by local authorities and limited ability to travel and meet with each other because of police restrictions.

Government practices and bureaucratic impediments restricted religious freedom and growth. 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 believers were sometimes subject to harassment from local officials.

Because of the lack of due process and inconsistent high-level oversight, religious activities can be subject to the discretion of local officials in their respective jurisdictions. In some cases local officials reportedly told religious leaders that national-level laws do not apply to their jurisdictions. In other cases different provinces applied the same laws differently. For example, the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai closely followed government policy and registered all of the SECV "meeting points" in the province pending their future recognition. However, in neighboring Dak Lak and Binh Phuoc Provinces, many SECV "meeting points" remained unregistered. In certain cases recognized and unrecognized Protestant groups were able to overcome local harassment or to overturn negative local decisions after they appealed to higher-level authorities. While a Revival Ekklesia Mission Vietnam meeting point in Go Vap District, Ho Chi Minh City, received a registration certificate in 2006, five gathering points in Ha Tay had their applications denied.

Several hundred ECVN congregations applied to register during the reporting period; however, most applications remained pending. Reasons often cited for delays in the registration process or rejection of registration applications included bureaucratic impediments, such as incorrect application procedures or forms, or incomplete information. Less frequently, local authorities cited vague security concerns and stated either that their political authority could be threatened or that confrontations could occur between traditional believers and recently converted Christians in a certain geographic area. Despite some registrations in the Northwest Highlands during the reporting period, much work remained in processing both Protestant and Catholic registrations.

Other obstacles to religious growth and training remained. Officially recognized religious groups faced some limitations in obtaining or publishing teaching materials, expanding training facilities, sharing their faith, building new houses of worship, 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.

Specific challenges included an unresolved ECVN property claim that prevented the establishment of a pastor training facility; failure by Dien Bien, Lai Chau, and Son La provincial authorities to register their local Catholic parishes; and failure of Ha Giang authorities to grant legal residency to a parish priest.

In some provinces house churches were required to submit lists of all worshipers as part of the registration process, in contravention of the legal framework on religion. This phenomenon appeared to be widespread in the Mekong Delta but was also noted in north-central Thanh Hoa Province. In some cases the authorities removed this requirement in response to the protests of the registering groups; in other cases the extra-legal requirement was maintained, impeding the registration process.

The Government requires all Buddhist monks, including Khmer Krom monks who practice the Theravada tradition, to be approved by and work under the officially recognized Buddhist organization, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. The CRA controls the number of Buddhist student monks, although the number of Buddhist academies at the

local and provincial levels, in addition to several university-equivalent academies, has increased in recent years.

In the Mekong Delta, reliable information indicated that at least ten ethnic Khmer monks were defrocked and subjected to disciplinary action, including detention and pagoda arrest, for participation in protests against the authorities in early 2007.

The Government continued to oppose efforts by the outlawed UBCV to operate and restricted the movement of UBCV leaders, with few exceptions. In August 2006 the Government allowed Thich Huyen Quang to travel to Ho Chi Minh City for 2 months for medical treatment but discouraged him from returning to Ho Chi Minh City in 2007. In April 2008 the UBCV reported that several of its monks in Lam Dong Province were evicted and forcibly removed from a pagoda that was subsequently turned over to the VBS. In one case a nun on the representative board of the UBCV in Khanh Hoa Province faced severe harassment beginning in March 2006 and reportedly was forced out of the pagoda she founded. Leaders in Ho Chi Minh City and Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province were able to organize Buddha's birthday celebrations in May 2008. When UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang died at his monastery in Binh Dinh Province on July 5, 2008, many senior UBCV monks, including Thich Quang Do, were allowed to travel to Binh Dinh to visit him in his final days of his illness and officiate at his funeral on July 11, 2008, amidst heavy police presence.

The Catholic Church operates 7 seminaries, with more than 1,000 students enrolled, as well as a new special training program for "older" students. All students must be approved by local authorities to enroll in a seminary and again prior to their ordination as priests. The Church believed that the number of students being ordained remained insufficient to support the growing Catholic population and indicated it would like to open additional seminaries and enroll new students more frequently, but leaders reported the Church lacked the internal capacity to do so. In 2008 the Church opened a pastoral center in Ho Chi Minh City to train lay persons to serve as deacons and in other non-ordained roles. Demand for theological studies is exceeding expectations, and the center is already at capacity.

The Government continued its oversight and, with varying degrees of success, exerted control over religious hierarchies and activities through Committees for Religious Affairs at the national and provincial levels. For example, the Government technically maintains veto power over Vatican appointments of bishops; however, in practice the Government cooperated with the Catholic Church in nominations for bishops' appointments during the reporting period.

There are no formal prohibitions on changing one's religion. However, many converts may shy away from applying for a new national identification card with their new religion listed as the procedure is cumbersome and they may fear government retribution. There were reports that local officials in rural communities continued to discourage conversion to Protestantism by threatening converts that they would face difficulties in applying for identity-related documents or lose education and social welfare allowances.

A 2006 version of a national CRA-produced training manual for local officials in the Northwest Highlands contained language that disparaged Protestantism and instructed officials to encourage recent Protestant converts to return to their traditional animistic

beliefs. Following pledges by the Government to diplomats and foreign representatives, the Government reported that the manual has been revised several times and the problematic language removed, acknowledging that it may not have been in compliance with regulations. The most recent 2007 version of this training manual was under review at the end of the reporting period.

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. Some missionaries visited the country despite this official 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 some continued to conduct religious training and services without harassment. Members of registered religious organizations are permitted to speak about their beliefs and may persuade others to adopt their religions in registered places of worship, but they are discouraged from doing so elsewhere. The Government controls and monitors all forms of public assembly, including assembly for religious activities; however, during the reporting period, large religious gatherings were allowed.

Although not official Government policy, Christians report that people who are known to be Catholic or Protestant are not considered for senior positions of responsibility in the Communist Party or the Government.

The Government continued to monitor and impede the activities of certain religious groups based on their political activism during the reporting period. National security and national solidarity provisions in the Constitution override laws and regulations providing for religious freedom, and these provisions reportedly were used to impede religious gatherings and the spread of religious beliefs to certain ethnic groups. The Penal Code, as amended in 1997, established penalties for vaguely-defined offenses, such as "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and nonbelievers." The Government continued to significantly limit the organized activities of independent religious groups and those individuals who were regarded as a threat to party authority.

The Hoa Hao faced some restrictions on their religious and political activities since 1975, in part because of lingering Communist Party suspicions stemming from the Hoa Hao's armed opposition to 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 instead demanded official recognition of their own

Hoa Hao body, the Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC). HHCBC members faced significant official repression, and frictions between some Hoa Hao activists and government officials in the Mekong Delta continued.

The Government continued to remain concerned that some ethnic minority groups active in this region were operating a self-styled "Dega Church," which reportedly mixes religious practice with political activism and calls for ethnic minority separatism. This factor complicated and slowed the registration and recognition process for other churches in the Central Highlands.

Despite improved conditions over the reporting period, SECV and house churches in the Central provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Binh Phuoc, and Dak Nong continue to experience close government scrutiny.

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. In 2007 the Religious Publishing House published approximately 800 books and other publications with a total of 1.3 million copies. A range of Bibles, Buddhist sacred scriptures, and other religious texts and publications were printed and distributed openly. The Religious Publishing House 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 Bible is printed in Vietnamese, Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, and English. The Religious Publishing House was considering a request to print the Bible in the H'mong language.

The Government allows travel for religious purposes, but the approval of authorities is required for participation in religious conferences and training courses abroad. Muslims were able to undertake the Hajj, and Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant officials were generally able to travel abroad for study and for conferences. Other unofficial religious leaders traveled 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 less frequent.

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 remained concerned about contact between separatist "Dega" Protestants in the Central Highlands and overseas supporters.

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 find the procedures overly cumbersome or fear government retribution. The Government does not designate religious affiliation on passports.

Adherence to a religious faith generally does not seriously disadvantage people 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 more than 3 million Communist Party members are religious believers. Practitioners of various religious groups serve in local and provincial government positions and are represented in the National Assembly. Some clergy and religious followers are members of the CPV-affiliated mass political and social organization, the Vietnam Fatherland Front. CPV and government officials routinely visit pagodas, temples, and churches, making a special point to visit Catholic and Protestant churches over Christmas.

Decree 22 stipulates that provincial People's Committees must approve the construction of new religious facilities. The renovation or upgrade of religious facilities also requires notification of authorities, although not necessarily a permit, depending on the extent of the renovation. The Decree stipulates that authorities must respond to a construction permit application within 20 days.

Provincial authorities have returned a limited number of church properties that were confiscated following reunification in 1975 and remained in protracted discussions on others. Many of the properties seized in the past were religious schools and hospitals that were incorporated into the state system. While the Government and the Catholic Church reached agreement on the return of one property, the status of many other properties remained unresolved. Recognized Protestant organizations obtained a small number of previously confiscated properties, but disputes continued over others. The SECV sought restitution for more than 250 properties; other Protestant denominations active in southern Vietnam pre-1975 also had property claims. Out of an estimated 100 former properties confiscated, Cao Dai leaders report approximately 30 properties have been returned.

Land issues are complicated by the country's history, as well as its recent rapid economic development. As in the case of the former Papal Nuncio site in Hanoi, there are sites claimed by both Buddhists and Catholics, since land once home to Buddhist pagodas was given to the Catholic Church during the French Colonial period. Some of the same sites were then taken over by the Communist Government during the revolutionary period. Further, land is an increasingly valuable commodity in the country, and the Government prioritizes plans that contribute to rapid economic development. Religious organizations, non-profit organizations, farmers, and small landowners must compete with business people and land developers with more financial and political clout. Religious leaders increasingly reported that their land disputes were matters of economic rather than religious discrimination.

Although the 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 people. The Church also operated a shelter for HIV-positive mothers and HIV-infected children. During the first half of 2008, training courses to instruct Catholic priests, nuns, and lay people in the care of HIV/AIDS patients were launched in several Mekong Delta provinces. The Ho Chi Minh City government and the Catholic Church remained in discussion about how to officially approve new social work initiatives, such as official legal status to carry out its HIV/AIDS activities, but it allowed the Church to pursue these initiatives quietly. Operating without a legal basis, however, has created some difficulties for the Church. For example, the shelter is unable to obtain legal birth records and public school enrollment for the children under its care. Charitable activities undertaken by religious groups in northern Vietnam were more restricted, but a number of northern provinces reportedly became more permissive during the reporting period. Thai Binh Province, for example, actively encouraged the Catholic Church's work in HIV/AIDS and the treatment of the sick and disabled. Haiphong authorities also began working with the Catholic Church in areas related to drug addiction treatment and HIV/AIDS during the reporting period, while the Catholic Diocese of Nam Dinh operated an orphanage.

ECVN leaders reported that provincial authorities in Thanh Hoa and Nam Dinh actively encouraged their churches to expand charitable activities. The VBS engaged in humanitarian activities, including anti-drug and child welfare programs, as well as HIV/AIDS programs and other charitable work across the country. The province of Hanoi allowed a number of VBS-run temples to run orphanages for abandoned and disabled children, along with HIV/AIDS treatment programs.

Muslim leaders in Ho Chi Minh City reported support from city officials in their work to assist the poor. The officially recognized Cao Dai and Hoa Hao organizations also reported involvement in numerous charitable activities and local development projects during the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Reports of abuses of religious freedom continued to diminish during the period covered by this report; however, some religious believers continued to experience harassment or repression because they operated without legal sanction. In a number of isolated instances, 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.

Some ethnic minority worshipers in the Central Highlands – particularly in areas suspected to be affiliated with the "Dega Church" – continued to be prevented from gathering to worship. However, the number of credible reports of incidents was

significantly lower compared with previous years and appeared to reflect individual bias at the local level rather than official central government policy. In some instances the local officials involved were reprimanded or fired.

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 persons based, at least in part, on their religious beliefs and practice, particularly in mountainous ethnic minority areas.

In April and May 2008, a pastor of the Full Gospel Church in Thanh Hoa Province reported several incidents of harassment including police intervening in prayer gatherings, fines of \$6 (VND 100,000) levied on participants, and police questioning.

Also in April and May 2008, the Full Gospel Church in the Hieu Tu Commune of Tieu Can District, Tra Vinh Province reported that local authorities disrupted services on several occasions and pressured the pastor to cease religious services by threatening to cut off government benefits. Two congregants were also allegedly beaten by local residents.

In March 2008 pastors from the Inter-Evangelistic Movement (IEM) Church in Binh Phuoc Province were allegedly beaten and insulted by commune-level police when they traveled to preach to H'mong ethnic minority followers in neighboring Dak Nong Province.

In February 2008 Catholics in Gia Lai Province were prevented from holding special services to mark the Lunar New Year holiday.

In December 2007 in That Hung commune of Hai Duong Province, local authorities prevented the Vietnam United Methodist Church from holding 2007 Christmas services at a pastor's home on the grounds that the church was not registered. Three pastors were detained and questioned, and access and electricity to the pastor's house was cut to prevent the services from being held.

A number of Methodist and United Gospel Outreach Church (UGOC) congregations in Quang Nam, Binh Phuoc, and Tien Giang provinces also reported difficulties during their Christmas celebrations. Some could not obtain the permits to hold services, while others obtained permits that limited the attendance of pastors and followers from other localities.

Also in December 2007 a Catholic congregation in Dien Bien Province held Christmas services, but afterwards the host reported being questioned by the police who wanted his promise not to host future gatherings because the congregation is not registered. The host refused to make such a promise, but did not report further harassment.

Six United Baptist congregations in the Chu Se District of Gia Lai Province reported that their applications for registration were denied by local authorities in October 2007. Officials also required the congregations to give them names of followers, who were then visited and intimidated by local police.

UGOC congregations in Long An Province continued to face problems during the reporting period. In August 2007 commune-level officials publicly denounced pastors in

one community and threatened followers with arrest and detention. In July 2007 police in another commune interrupted and ended a United Gospel Outreach Church summer bible class of 52 children, confiscated Bible materials, and summoned two pastors for questioning. A United Gospel Outreach member reported that local commune authorities came to her house in July 2007 to pressure her to renounce her faith, threatening her with imprisonment and revocation of public government benefits.

In August 2007 local police interrupted a Revival Ekklesia Mission Vietnam house church gathering in Ha Tay Province. The police confiscated one hymnal and ten Bibles and issued an administrative violation and a warning that participants in any future gathering would be arrested.

In early June 2007 local ECVN congregants in Bat Xat District in Lao Cai Province reported that local authorities, including members of a border protection special task force, came to the district to conduct training on the legal framework on religion. According to the congregants, local authorities imposed fines of up to approximately \$100 (VND 1.7 million) on eight "illegal Protestants" and imposed material fines (confiscating chickens) on nine others. The "illegal Protestants" were accused of following Protestantism without seeking permission from provincial authorities. Following the incident, the ECVN leadership formally asked the provincial authorities to investigate the case but did not receive a response. Congregants did not report any further developments during the reporting period.

Although church registrations should not expire, an ECVN-affiliated church in Lao Cai Province received a registration certificate issued by provincial authorities in May 2007 with an expiration date of December 31, 2007. After the church received its registration certificate, the police called in the church leaders and warned them to "behave" or the church would lose its legal status and any reapplication for registration would be denied.

In January 2007 a Protestant deacon from Tuyen Quang Province was arrested for transporting photocopies of a H'mong language Bible and religious training materials. After several days detention, he was fined \$62 (VND 1 million).

In January 2007 in Ninh Binh Province, police destroyed a Pieta statue following a Catholic procession. In March 2007 the local commune chief of police was reprimanded, and local authorities offered to pay for the restoration of the statue. The then bishop of the diocese declined the offer and repaired the statue privately in July-August 2007.

Although religious leaders of some Protestant congregations in the Central Highlands believe local authorities are actively discouraging new converts from continuing to practice their faith, there were few credible reports of leaders of unregistered churches in the Central and Northwest Highlands being harassed or detained and pressured to renounce their faith during this reporting period.

The dissemination of the legal framework on religion has remained an uneven process, especially in northern Vietnam and the Northwest Highlands. Through the end of the period covered by this report, many pastors and priests reported that police and other authorities had not implemented fully these legal codes. During the reporting period, some Protestants in the northern and Northwest Highlands provinces reported that local officials often used legal pretexts to prevent or complicate religious registration.

Despite significant improvements in the Central Highlands, SECV congregations in some districts of Dak Lak Province stated that registration of new meeting points continues to be slow and noted that their main issue was training new pastors for their growing congregations. A Protestant house church leader in Dak Lak Province reported threats and harassment from local authorities, including the placement of a sign in front of the house church that read, "Military Area, No House Construction, No Land Encroachment." The sign was removed in October 2007. Conditions appeared even more restrictive in Sa Thay District in Kontum Province, where senior district officials in early 2006 argued that there was "no religion" in the area. More recent reports from Kontum indicate that the situation is improving. There were indications that, at least in some cases, more senior government officials intervened and rebuked local authorities for harassing house churches in contravention of the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism. In a few incidents in the Mekong Delta, local authorities reportedly increased harassment of groups that submitted registration applications.

Although stating that regular and systematic Government interference of their religious services had ceased since 2004, members of the UGOC in southern Long An Province continued to report harassment from local level officials. In April 2008, local officials intervened in prayer sessions at a pastor's house and issued an administrative reprimand for violating the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. In November 2007 local police reportedly interrupted gatherings at a meeting point.

In June 2006, the owners of four UGOC house churches were briefly detained on the grounds that it was illegal for an unregistered church to hold services. The UGOC in Long An is unable to hold regular overnight religious retreats, to gain permission to hold gatherings for 50 or more persons, or to hold regular Bible training classes. UGOC members claim they can publish and disseminate religious materials "if done quietly."

In June 2007 a group of 150 pastors of the Inter-Evangelistic Movement Bible Church (IEM) were detained on buses for several hours by southern Binh Phuoc Province authorities after a prayer gathering of 2,000 followers. Local authorities complained to and questioned leaders about their "evangelizing and organization of a large crowd without a permit." The group was later allowed to return to HCMC, and the head of the Provincial CRA offered to assist in IEM's provincial registration applications.

It has been even more difficult for IEM followers in several locations in Northwest Dien Bien Province, where police actively broke up meetings of worshippers, and authorities refused to register IEM meeting points. Followers there submitted credible reports that they were forced to "meet secretly at night, in the fields" in order to pray. Local authorities also actively pressured IEM followers there to abandon their faith and return to traditional beliefs. This has continued on and off for several years.

In April 2008, the head monk of the UBCV-affiliated Phuoc Hue pagoda in Quang Tri province reported that police and local officials came to the pagoda to announce the city's decision to take away part of the pagoda's land that was housing the kitchen. Local police reportedly searched the monk's residence and confiscated a computer, a digital camera, a cell phone, and approximately \$6,300 in both U.S. and Vietnamese currency. During the search, the monk and several junior monks were held in the yard. Local workers constructed a wall to separate the Buddhist temple from the kitchen. The

police did not present a warrant for the search, nor did they issue any documentation related to the confiscation of the monk's belongings. In May 2008, on the day of Buddha's birthday celebration, a senior officer from the provincial police came to the pagoda, apologized for the search, and promised to return his belongings and money; however, the monk has yet to receive anything back.

In April 2008, Monk Thich Tri Khai was reportedly expelled from Giac Hai Pagoda, Don Duong District, Lam Dong Province by local authorities, who then raided the pagoda and changed the locks. Local police and Vietnam Fatherland Front officials allegedly organized local Buddhists and citizens to publicly denounce Monk Khai in advance of his expulsion. Two UBCV monks attempting to visit Khai were detained and questioned by police. Unconfirmed reports state that Khai became ill due to the police harassment and wanted to go to Ho Chi Minh City for medical treatment in May; however, he has been out of contact since that time.

In November 8, 2007, in the Mekong Delta, one ethnic Khmer monk who had been defrocked in Cambodia and deported to Vietnam was sentenced to one year in prison for "sabotaging national unity" under Article 87 of the Vietnamese Penal Code. The provincial court alleged he had been inciting residents to participate in land rights protests.

The Government claimed that it did not hold any religious prisoners; instead, people are 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. The Government, as well as many official and unofficial religious leaders, depicted the protests as being motivated by disputes over land or other socioeconomic grievances rather than religious concerns. While determining the facts in these cases is extremely difficult due to the lack of transparency in the justice system, religious leaders from the major religious groups report that they do not have any followers in prison for their faith.

At least 15 individuals, including UBCV monks Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do and Catholic priest Pham Van Loi, lived under conditions resembling house arrest for reasons related primarily to their political beliefs or attempts to form unauthorized organizations, despite the apparent lack of any official charges against them. The movement of a number of other UBCV, Cao Dai, Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Protestant dignitaries and believers was restricted or was watched and followed by police. 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 producing and distributing 'illegal' recordings of the Hoa Hao faith." In addition, they were fined \$1,640 (26 million VND) each.

Forced Religious Conversion

Decree 22 states, "Acts to force citizens to follow a religion or renounce their faith...are not allowed." The Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism contains a similarly worded statement. While government officials stated 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. A few incidents were reported during the period covered by this report.

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

In April 2007, according to credible reports, police in Minh Hoa District in northern Quang Binh Province confiscated Bibles from IEM followers and pressured followers to abandon their faith, telling them reportedly that Protestantism "was a bad American religion."

In March 2007 police in East Dien Bien District of Dien Bien Province reportedly went to IEM followers' individual homes to pressure them to abandon their faith. In one incident local police reportedly told followers that "believing in Christ is to believe in the United States."

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 significantly during the period covered by this report. In many areas Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, as well as the Government, reported an increase in religious activity and observance. Compared to previous years, the Government continued to ease restrictions placed upon most religious groups. Much of the change came from stronger implementation of significant revisions to the legal framework governing religion instituted in 2004 and 2005 and a more positive government attitude toward Protestant groups. Many recognized and unrecognized religious groups, especially Protestant groups in the Central and Northwest Highlands, reported that the situation for their practitioners continued to improve overall. In addition, the central Government continued to actively train, inform, and encourage provincial and local authorities to comply with regulations under the legal framework on religion.

During the period covered by this report, SECV-affiliated churches and house churches generally reported improved conditions in the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Dak Nong. The SECV reported that 10 new Protestant SECV congregations and 21 additional SECV meeting points in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc Province were registered in the period covered by this report. One congregation may have multiple meeting points.

Most SECV congregations and meeting places in the Central Highlands were able to register their activities with local officials and were allowed to operate without significant harassment. For example, hundreds of places of worship were allowed to operate in Gia Lai, effectively legalizing operations for tens of thousands of believers in the province.

The SECV also opened a number of new churches in Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Dak Nong Provinces. For example, Gia Lai authorities facilitated the construction of five new SECV churches: Ia Grai District, Duc Co District, Pleiku City, and two in Dak Doa District. In addition, the SECV continued to conduct Bible classes in these provinces to provide training to 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.

Police and other government officials in the Northwest Highlands worked with house church leaders in some areas to inform them of the new regulations. The CRA conducted training sessions to educate provincial and district officials about the new religious regulations to ensure that they would "implement these policies in an orderly fashion." The CRA also conducted training seminars for religious leaders. In 2007 CRA held training courses for an estimated 2,000 civil servants from villages in the northern mountain provinces, Central Highlands, and Binh Phuoc Province. ECVN contacts in the Northwest Highlands confirmed that authorities allowed most unregistered congregations to worship in their homes and to meet openly, in accordance with the Prime Minister's 2005 Instruction.

Many pastors of Protestant denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Baptists, United Gospel Outreach Church, and Assemblies of God preferred not to join the SECV or ECVN because of doctrinal differences. In many parts of the country, particularly in urban areas, these and other Protestant denominations reported that they were able to practice openly and with the knowledge of local officials. While there were exceptions, the level of official harassment of unrecognized house churches belonging to non-SECV and ECVN denominations continued to decline across the country. The Government held discussions about registration and recognition with leaders of a number of Protestant denominations, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Attendance at religious services continued to increase during the period covered by this report. The number of Buddhist monks, Protestant pastors, and Catholic priests also continued to increase, and restrictions on church services for Protestants generally continued to diminish. Catholics across the country were allowed to celebrate Christmas and Easter without interference. A handful of Protestant congregations in the Central Highlands had difficulty celebrating during the Christmas season but reported that they were allowed to celebrate Easter without problems. ECVN-affiliated congregations in the northwest province of Dien Bien reported no difficulty in celebrating Christmas and Easter, a marked improvement from past years.

The Catholic Church reported continued easing of government control over Church assignment of new clergy, and many new priests were ordained. The Government no longer restricts the number of students who may enter seminary each year. Reciprocal official visits between the Vatican and the Government and the establishment of a joint committee to discuss diplomatic normalization enhanced contact between Vatican authorities and the country's Catholics. The Government maintained its regular dialogue with the Vatican on a range of issues, such as diplomatic normalization, Church leadership, organizational activities, land issues, and interfaith dialogue.

The Government and the VBS successfully hosted the fifth International UN Vesak Day in May 2008. This was the first international conference of Buddhists in Vietnam, with 3,500 attendees, 2,000 of whom were foreign delegates representing more than 80 countries.

France-based Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh was again permitted to return to attend the International UN Vesak Day events in May 2008. He traveled widely through the country, met with large groups of Buddhists, and spoke to intellectuals and government officials, including the U.S. Ambassador.

During the reporting period, some religious groups were also allowed to convene large religious gatherings, including Catholic celebrations at the La Vang Catholic sanctuary, traditional pilgrimage events such as the Hung Kings' Festival, Buddhist ceremonies in Hue, and the Hoa Hao Founding Day and commemoration of the founder's death. At each event, attendance was estimated in the tens of thousands or higher. House church Protestants gathered in large groups for special worship services in Ho Chi Minh City and elsewhere. Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi officials also facilitated large Christmas and Easter celebrations by a variety of Christian denominations.

In November 2007, with the support of the Government, the Institute for Global Engagement, a U.S.-based NGO, cosponsored a conference on religion and the rule of law in Southeast Asia along with the Vietnam-USA Society, the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, and Brigham Young University in Hanoi. The forum brought together international scholars and lawyers from Vietnam and twelve other countries to discuss religious freedom and its implications for a state's religion, culture, legal development, and national security.

In October 2007 the Government welcomed and facilitated the visit of a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation to Vietnam. A group of USCIRF Commissioners and staff met with top government and religious leaders and were accorded unprecedented access to political prisoners and family members of prisoners and dissidents. The full cooperation of the Government with the USCIRF delegation is a marked improvement from past government reticence to allow such meetings.

The Government reported that during 2007 there were 383 newly-built places of worship and another 461 upgraded or renovated places of worship. The Government also continued to issue land use certificates to religious establishments. Catholic and Protestant groups reported some progress on disputes over land claims. In April 2008 provincial authorities and the Catholic Church reached agreement on the return of La Vang church and pilgrimage center, a significant Catholic pilgrimage site and one of three priority properties the Catholic Church has formally requested the Government return. Following large gatherings at the former Papal Nuncio in Hanoi (controlled by the Hanoi People's Committee) in February 2008, government officials agreed to discuss the future of the site with Catholic leaders. However, the Government continued to struggle with outstanding land claims and did not have a systematic method or central office for reviewing and ruling on these disputes.

The Government continued to publicize its new policy of religious freedom and tolerance through the organs of the state. The CRA continued to train more provincial

propaganda cadres from the Northwest Highlands to disseminate information on religion to reduce societal tensions arising between followers of traditional ethnic minority beliefs and Protestant converts.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were few reported instances of societal discrimination or violence based on religion during the period covered by this report. In October 2007 an SECV pastor in Tra Vinh Province reported an incident where he and some of his followers were beaten by an estimated 50 ethnic Khmer residents and their house church was vandalized. When called to the commune police station the same day, they were beaten again by a group of approximately 200 locals in the presence of a Khmer monk and local authorities. The pastor stated commune-level authorities forced him to sign a commitment to cease holding services at the house church. As the group returned home under police escort, several individuals became separated from the group and were beaten again, requiring hospitalization for their injuries. This congregation's registration had been pending since 2006.

The experience 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 are reported to 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City actively and regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of Communist Party leaders and government officials, including authorities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and the provinces. The mission also maintained regular contact with religious leaders and dissidents.

The U.S. Ambassador, the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, and other embassy and consulate officers raised religious freedom issues with senior cabinet ministers, including the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the head of the Government Committee for 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, other senior government officials, chairpersons of Provincial People's Committees around the country, and other officials, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands. Embassy and consulate officials maintained regular contact

with the key government offices responsible for respect for human rights. Embassy and consulate officers repeatedly informed officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship.

Mission officers urged recognition of a broad spectrum of religious groups, including the UBCV, Protestant house churches, and dissenting Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. They urged greater freedom for recognized religious groups, and for ending restrictions on unregistered groups. The Ambassador also requested that the Government investigate alleged abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. Mission officers, as well as the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, continued to urge a complete end to forced renunciations and the punishment of officials involved. They also called for the registration and reopening of house churches that had been closed.

Representatives of the embassy and the consulate general had frequent contact with leaders of major religious communities, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Muslims. Consulate officers maintained regular contact with Thich Quang Do and other UBCV-affiliated monks. Embassy and consulate 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, Kontum, Can Tho, Lang Son, Son Tay, Thanh Hoa, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Buon Ma Thuot, and Haiphong dioceses, as well as other members of the Catholic Episcopal Conference. Embassy and consulate officers also met repeatedly with leaders of the SECV, ECVN, and 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. Mission officers continued to encourage and monitor implementation of the Government's legal framework on religion on a regular basis, at the national, provincial, and local levels.