

# Vietnam

**Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor**

## **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of worship; however, government restrictions on the organized activities of many religious groups continued.

Respect for religious freedom and practice improved in some regards during the reporting period. However, significant problems remained, including occasional harassment and excessive use of force by local government officials against religious groups in some locations, and delays in approving registrations of Protestant congregations. The government took further steps to implement its 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and supplemental decrees on religious policy issued in 2005 (collectively, the government's "legal framework on religion"). The government also facilitated construction of new churches, prayer houses, pagodas, and training facilities for furthering the education of thousands of monks, priests, nuns, and pastors. New congregations were registered in many of the 64 provinces, and one new religious group and two Protestant denominations received national registration or recognition. The government permitted the expansion of religious organizations' charitable activities. President Nguyen Minh Triet met with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican. Vietnam and the Holy See agreed to a Vatican appointment of a non-resident Representative for Vietnam as a first step toward the establishment of full diplomatic relations. The Catholic Church, Protestant congregations, and other smaller religious groups reported that their ability to gather and worship generally improved and that the government allowed registered religious groups to assign new clergy with limited restrictions. The government also permitted the Buddhist, Catholic, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Protestant faiths to hold several historic large-scale religious services throughout the country, some with over 100,000 participants.

Despite areas of progress during the reporting period, significant problems remained, especially at the provincial and village levels. These included the slow pace, in some cases due to government inaction, of registration of Protestant congregations in the North and the Northwest Highlands. Inconsistent application of procedures for registration caused some of the above-mentioned problems. In some areas, Protestant congregations experienced harassment. After five years of pending application, the central government has not yet approved a translation of the Bible in H'mong. The government maintained a prominent role overseeing all officially recognized religions. Religious groups encountered the greatest restrictions when the government perceived their activities as challenging its rule or the authority of the Communist Party. The government continued to refuse registration and to discourage participation in unrecognized factions of the Hoa Hao Buddhist and Cao Dai faiths reportedly due to their past and current support of opponents of the government. The leadership of the unrecognized Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) reported the government continued to monitor its activities closely and encouraged leaders to restrict their movements. There were also instances

of government participation in, or sanction of, violence against religious groups. These included attacks on the Plum Village Community followers of Buddhist Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and the excessive use of force in the destruction of a large concrete crucifix on disputed territory at the Dong Chiem parish. There were also reports of harsh treatment of detainees accused of initiating violence during a protest over the enforcement of an agreement between the Catholic Church and the government to close a cemetery in Con Dau parish. Accounts of the series of events leading to the incident varied, even between parishioners and Catholic leaders.

There were few instances of societal violence based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period. Many Catholics and Protestants reported Christians experienced unofficial discrimination when applying for government positions.

The U.S. embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City maintain regular dialogue with senior and working-level government officials to advocate for greater religious freedom. U.S. officials met and communicated regularly with religious leaders, including religious activists under government scrutiny. Secretary Clinton and other State Department officials raised religious freedom concerns with government officials and called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Religious freedom also was a central issue in the 2009 U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The country has an area of 127,000 square miles and a population of 89.6 million. Most estimates suggest more than half of the population is at least nominally Buddhist. The Roman Catholic Church constitutes 7 percent. Several Cao Dai organizations constitute 2.5 to 4 percent, the primary Hoa Hao organization 1.5 to 3 percent, Protestants 1 to 2 percent, and Muslims less than 0.1 percent of the population. Most other citizens consider themselves nonreligious, although some practice traditional beliefs such as animism and 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 government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) cites an estimate of 10 million (11 percent of the population) practicing Mahayana Buddhists, most of whom are members of the ethnic Kinh community (the country's majority group, also referred to as Viet). There are proportionally fewer Buddhists in the highland areas, although migration of Kinh to these areas is changing the distribution. In Ho Chi Minh City alone, there are more than 1,000 active Buddhist pagodas. A Khmer ethnic minority in the south practices Theravada Buddhism and has more than 570 pagodas. Numbering more than one million, they live almost exclusively in the Mekong Delta.

In 1981 the officially sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) was established incorporating all Mahayana, Theravada, and Bhikshu Buddhism under its umbrella. All Buddhist groups within the VBS are proportionally represented throughout the leadership structure and organization. In practice Theravada monks meet separately to determine issues such as doctrine, education, and other community needs to raise within the VBS.

The government requires all Buddhist monks, including Khmer Krom monks who practice the Theravada tradition, to be approved by and work under the government-sponsored VBS. In theory the CRA regulates the number of Buddhist student monks, although the number of Buddhist academies at the local and provincial levels, in addition to four university-equivalent academies, has greatly increased in recent years. Since the government's merger of all Buddhist organizations into the VBS, the government does not recognize the legitimacy of the UBCV. There are several recently recognized religious organizations that have Buddhist influences, although they are separate and distinct from the VBS. Of these the Pure-Land Buddhist Home Practice faith has the largest membership with more than 1.3 million followers.

Although government statistics indicate there are 6.28 million Catholics, other estimates place the number at eight million. Catholics live throughout the country, with the largest concentrations in the provinces around Ho Chi Minh City, in parts of the Central Highlands, and in the provinces southeast of Hanoi. Catholicism has revived in recent years with newly rebuilt or renovated churches and a growing number of persons who want to be religious workers. Three archbishops, 44 bishops, and nearly 4,000 priests oversaw 26 dioceses. There are more than 10,000 places of worship including six seminaries and two clergy training centers. The number preparing for the priesthood has grown by more than 50 percent over the past five years and now totals 1,500, according to the Vatican.

Government statistics put the number of Cao Dai at 2.3 million, although Cao Dai officials claim approximately 3.9 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 separate groups within the Cao Dai religion; the largest is the Tay Ninh sect, which represents more than half of Cao Dai believers and more than 40 percent of the population of the province. Cao Dai is syncretic, combining elements of many faiths.

According to the government, there are 1.3 million Hoa Hao followers; affiliated expatriate groups estimate as many as three 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. A small number of Hoa Hao belong to other sects that oppose the HHAC, such as the Pure Hoa Hao Church and the Traditional Hoa Hao Church.

The two largest officially recognized Protestant churches are the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and the smaller Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN). The Vietnam Baptist Convention (Grace Southern Baptist), United World Mission Church, Vietnam Mennonite Church, Vietnam Presbyterian Church, Vietnam Baptist Society (Southern Baptist), Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Vietnam Christian Fellowship also are officially recognized. Other Protestant denominations also are present, including the Assemblies of God (officially registered) as well as the United Methodist Church and others registered locally but not registered on the national level. Estimates of the number of Protestants ranged from government figures of one million to claims by churches of over two million, with the strongest recent growth occurring from 1996 to 2000. 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, Sedang, and M'ngong, among others).

The small Muslim population numbers 60,000 to 80,000, and mosques are located in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, western An Giang Province, and provinces in the southern coastal area. The government estimates there are nearly 73,000 Muslims. The Muslim community is composed mainly of ethnic Cham; however, in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang Province it includes some ethnic Kinh and migrants originally from Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Approximately 40 percent of Muslims are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent 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 7,200 Baha'is, largely concentrated in the south. Baha'i followers were present prior to 1975 but open practice of the Baha'i Faith was banned from 1975 to 1992. They received national recognition as a new religion in 2008. In May 2010 the Baha'i Faith held its third national convention with more than 300 representatives attending from its 73 registered congregations.

There are approximately 1,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) throughout the country. The church has two locally recognized congregations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have 55 active congregations in 18 provinces with 3,000 members. There are 32 places of worship registered locally. A majority of the congregations are in the south with half the total membership located in Ho Chi Minh City and 500 members in Hanoi.

There is one Jewish temple in Ho Chi Minh City serving approximately 150 Jews living in the city. While most members are foreign residents, the congregation is growing.

At least 14 million citizens constituting 17 percent or more of the population reportedly do not practice any organized religion. The government does not categorize those whose activities are limited to visiting pagodas on ceremonial holidays as practicing Buddhists. Under this definition the number of nonreligious persons could rise to 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. Increasing numbers of H'mong, Dao, Jarai, Ede, M'ngong, Thai, and Sedang in the Northwest and Central Highlands are converting to Protestantism.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for 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, restrictions exist in policy and practice. The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief (Ordinance) 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, affirming that violations of these freedoms are prohibited. It states, however, that the "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.

Under the Ordinance government has control and oversight of religious organizations. Religious denominations must be officially recognized or registered, and the "appropriate" lower-level authorities must approve activities and leadership of individual religious congregations. Appropriate authorities must also approve the establishment of seminaries and the organization of and enrollment in religious classes. The appointment of priests or other religious officials requires authorities' approval only when a higher level foreign religious organization such as the Vatican is involved. The Ordinance explicitly bans forced renunciations of faith. The Ordinance requires religious organizations to inform appropriate authorities of their annual activities or the investiture and transfer of clerics, and no longer requires official government approval. Further, the Ordinance encourages religious groups to carry out charitable activities in health care and education, which were limited in the past.

The 2005 Prime Minister's "Instruction on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism" (Instruction) calls on authorities to facilitate the requests of recognized Protestant denominations to construct churches as well as to train and appoint pastors. The Instruction directs authorities to help unrecognized denominations register their congregations so they can worship openly and move toward fulfilling the criteria 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, such as having the required minimum number of adherents. 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.

Implementing Decree 22, also issued in 2005, provides further guidance on the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. It delineates specific procedures by which an unrecognized religious organization may register its places of worship, its clerics, and its activities and thus operate openly. It provides procedures for these groups to apply for official recognition from the government to gain additional rights. The Decree specifies that a religious organization must have 20 years of "stable religious operation" in the country to be recognized by the government and states that past operation in the country can be counted toward this requirement. The Decree further defines specific time periods for the government to consider requests from religious

organizations and requires officials to give an organization an explanation in writing for any rejected application.

Decree 22 also clarifies the procedures for religious organizations and individual congregations seeking official recognition. In principle, recognized religious denominations 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 receive national-level registration, which according to the legal framework involves several legal stages. 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 review period. The CRA must issue a license before an organization is considered registered. After maintaining national registration for one year, the eligible religious group may apply for full legal recognition after hosting a national convention where it elects leaders. It also must receive government approval of its leadership, structure, national charter, and activities.

The Decree further specifies 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. In the case of a refusal, a specific reason must be included in the written response, although this requirement also does not appear to be consistently followed. There is no specific mechanism for appeal in the Ordinance, nor are the reasons for denying a request restricted in any way.

The Decree and the Law on Land stipulate that churches are not permitted to purchase land as legal entities and provincial People's Committees must grant the land and approve the construction of new religious facilities. Typically, the land is purchased by a member of a congregation and then deeded to the province, followed by the granting of the land to the congregation. The renovation or upgrade of religious facilities also requires notification to authorities, although not necessarily requiring a permit, depending on the extent of the renovation. The Decree stipulates that authorities must respond to a construction permit application within 20 days.

The national-level CRA is charged with disseminating information about the legal framework on religion to authorities at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels and assuring uniform compliance. Implementation of the legal framework on religion 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 Ordinance.

The government does not officially favor a particular religion. Virtually all senior government and CPV officials, as well as the majority of National Assembly delegates, are formally "without religion." Many party and government officials openly practiced traditional ancestor worship; however, some visited Buddhist or Cao Dai pagodas. The CPV asserts that tens of thousands of the more than three million CPV members are religious believers. The prominent traditional

position of Buddhism does not adversely affect religious freedom for others, including those who do not practice a religion.

Adherence to a religious faith generally does not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernment civil, economic, and secular life, although it prevents advancement within the CPV and military. Practitioners of various religious groups serve in local and provincial government positions and are represented in the National Assembly. Some religious organizations, such as the VBS, as well as clergy and religious followers are members of the CPV-affiliated mass political and social organization, the Vietnam Fatherland Front. High-ranking government officials often make a special point to send greetings and visit churches over Christmas and Easter as well as attend Vesak day activities.

The government officially recognizes the Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Baha'i, Muslim, Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, Threefold Southern Tradition, and Threefold Enlightened Truth Path faiths as religious organizations. Individual congregations within these recognized groups must also be registered. Practitioners of alternative Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai groups do not participate in government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations.

The government allows travel for religious purposes, but religious leaders must have prior approval to go abroad for religious conferences and training courses. Muslims were able to undertake the Hajj while Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant officials were generally able to travel abroad for study and for conferences. Catholic leaders regularly travel to the Vatican for consultations. Other unofficial religious leaders regularly travel internationally.

The government requires all religious publishing to be done by the Religious Publishing House, which is part of the State Publishing House's Office of Religious Affairs, or by other government-approved publishing houses after the government first approves the proposed items. From 2006 to 2008, the Religious Publishing House published close to 1,800 different books and other publications, totaling more than 4.5 million copies. An updated figure was not available to include in the current reporting period. A range of Bibles, Buddhist sacred scriptures, and other religious texts and publications were printed and distributed openly. The Bible is printed in Vietnamese, Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'nong, and English. The Bible is also printed in the Bana, Ede, K'hor, and Giarai ethnic languages, although the government has not yet approved printing in H'mong. Since 1994, under a government license, the SECV has distributed over one million Bibles in five ethnic languages. Since 2009 they have distributed 50,000 Bibles in Vietnamese, K'hor, and Ede.

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

The government does not observe any religious holidays as national holidays.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools; however, it permitted 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, and Catholics have taught at Ho Chi Minh City universities, although they were not allowed to wear religious dress or 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. Khmer Theravada Buddhists and Cham Muslims regularly hold religious and language classes outside 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.

Religious affiliation is indicated on citizens' national identification cards and in "family books," which are household identification documents. In practice, many persons who consider themselves religious choose not to indicate a religious affiliation on their identification cards, and government statistics include them as nonreligious. Although it is possible to change the classification of religious affiliation on national identification cards, many converts find the procedures overly cumbersome or fear government retribution. The government does not designate religious affiliation in passports.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The constitutional right to freedom of belief and religion continued to be subject to uneven interpretation and protection. Government practices and bureaucratic impediments restricted religious freedom.

The government generally allowed increasing numbers of individuals and groups to express their religious beliefs, and most religious groups reported their ability to meet openly for religious worship improved. However, the government requires the registration of all activities by religious groups and uses this requirement to restrict and actively discourage participation in certain unrecognized religious groups, including the UBCV and some Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai groups.

Because of the lack of due process and inconsistent oversight, religious activities can be subject to the discretion of local officials. In some cases local officials reportedly told religious leaders that national laws did not apply to their jurisdictions. 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.

Several hundred ECVN congregations continued to await action on their applications to register. Reasons cited for delays in the process or rejection of applications included bureaucratic impediments such as not following correct procedures in completing forms or providing incomplete information. Local authorities also 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 many provinces, Protestant churches were required to submit lists of all worshippers as part of the registration process, although the legal framework on religion does not require this information. This practice appeared to be widespread. In some cases authorities removed this requirement in response to the protests of the registering groups; in other cases the extra-legal requirement was maintained, slowing the registration process.

In Dak Lak Province, approximately 90 SECV "meeting points" remained unregistered, although government officials stated that half would receive their registration before the end of 2010.

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.

There were no formal prohibitions on changing one's religion. The cumbersome process of applying for a new national identification card (ID) with the new religion may deter some individuals from changing their IDs after conversion.

Persons who belonged to unofficial religious groups were not permitted to speak publicly about their beliefs, but some conducted religious training and services without harassment. Members of registered religious organizations may speak about their beliefs and may persuade others to adopt their religions, but only in their registered places of worship. The government controlled all forms of public assembly; however, several large religious gatherings were allowed.

The government continued to oppose UBCV operation of charitable activities and restricted the movement of some UBCV leaders, although the UBCV operated many pagodas without restriction. The UBCV held several large events to mark Vesak Day, most without incident. UBCV Supreme Patriarch traveled to Hue and delivered a sermon during a ceremony attended by more than 700 individuals. In April the UBCV executive board consisting of 40 senior monks denounced the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS), asked the government to return all UBCV properties, and called for a democratic regime in Hanoi. As in previous reporting periods, UBCV leaders reported they were urged to restrict their movements although they were able to receive visits from foreign diplomats, visit other UBCV members, and maintain contact with associates overseas; however, these activities were closely scrutinized. One foreigner, following an interview with Thich Quang Do for a film, was temporarily detained and questioned by police in March. Provincial leaders of the UBCV throughout the southern region reported routine surveillance by local authorities. UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do stated he was allowed to leave his pagoda to visit his doctor once or twice a month and could meet with others inside and outside the pagoda.

The government continued to monitor and impede the activities of certain religious groups based on their political activism. The government invoked national security and solidarity provisions in the constitution to override laws and regulations providing for religious freedom, which impeded some religious gatherings and attempts by affected religious followers to spread beliefs to certain ethnic groups.

The penal code, as amended in 1997, establishes penalties for vaguely defined offenses such as "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and nonbelievers." The government continued to limit the organized activities of independent religious groups and of individuals who were regarded as a threat to CPV authority.

The government formed and recognized the official Hoa Hao body, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council, in 1999. Several leaders of the Hoa Hao community, including several pre-1975 leaders, openly criticized the council as subservient to the government. Dissenting Hoa Hao groups formed two smaller churches, the Traditional Hoa Hao Church and the Pure Hoa Hao Church. They have also faced some restrictions on their religious and political activities since 1975, due in part to lingering CPV concerns about the Hoa Hao's prior armed opposition to communist forces dating back to French colonial rule and involvement with dissident political groups.

The government continued to assert that some ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands were operating a self-styled "Dega Church," which reportedly mixed religious practice with political activism and called for ethnic minority separatism. This suspicion made the registration process for other churches in the area more complicated. SECV and house churches in the provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Binh Phuoc, and Dak Nong continued to experience government scrutiny because of feared association with separatist groups overseas.

The Religious Publishing House has not yet acted on a longstanding request to allow printing of the Bible in the H'mong language. The delay was due to the fact that the government recognizes only an archaic form of the H'mong language that is not in regular use today and cannot be read by the average H'mong. The proposed H'mong translation is a more current form of the language.

The government allowed, and in some cases encouraged, links between officially recognized religious bodies and coreligionists overseas; however, the government discouraged contact between the UBCV and its foreign Buddhist supporters. Contact between some unregistered Protestant groups and their foreign supporters were sometimes discouraged but nonetheless occurred regularly, including training, and provision of financial support and religious materials. The government remained critical of contact between separatist "Dega" Protestants in the Central Highlands and overseas supporters.

State-run media openly criticized religious leaders, such as Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet and internationally-known Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, after disagreements with local officials over land rights issues or religious policies. Particular CPV newspapers printed assertions that Thich Nhat Hanh had a sexual encounter with a Buddhist nun. They also declared Archbishop Kiet "unpatriotic" and "opposed to the government." The Chairman of the People's Committee of Hanoi sent a letter to the Vatican calling for Kiet's transfer. Kiet's earlier request to the Vatican to resign due to medical difficulties was accepted in May.

Specific challenges included unresolved property claims with virtually all churches including the Catholic Church, SECV, and ECVN. Provincial authorities have returned a limited number of properties confiscated from religious organizations after 1975 and remained in protracted

discussions on others. Many properties seized were schools and hospitals later incorporated into the state system.

The country's history and its recent rapid economic development complicated land issues, especially as the government promoted rapid development as a priority. Many Vietnamese individuals and nearly every religious denomination in the country prior to 1975 have outstanding land claims resulting from the nationalization of private property following the war. Some claims were further complicated by the fact that land once home to Buddhist pagodas was given to the Catholic Church during the French colonial period. Religious leaders reported that their land disputes were more often matters of economic rather than religious discrimination. While the government and the Catholic Church agreed to the return of four properties in 2009, the status of many other properties remained unresolved.

In Nghe An Province, local officials sold a portion of the land on which the disputed ruins of the Cau Ram Church were located, to build an apartment complex. The site had been bombed in 1968, and the provincial government had seized the church in 1996 and converted it to a war memorial to "preserve and protect for future generations the memory of American War Crimes." In May 2010 several thousand Catholics celebrated Mass at the site, as a protest against the government sale of the land for development.

In Da Nang in May 2010, police clashed with local Catholics at a cemetery in Con Dau village. The government earlier used eminent domain to seize the property and develop the region into an ecotourism resort. Six Catholic parishioners who reportedly started a physical altercation with police were arrested and were awaiting trial at the end of the reporting period. There were reports of harsh treatment of detainees. Accounts of the incident varied, even between parishioners and Catholic leaders.

In March 2010 two leaders of unrecognized Hoa Hao groups in Can Tho, Dang Thanh Dinh, and Dang Van Nghia, were denounced in the state-run media for opposing the government and stirring unrest. The two leaders led a large and growing congregation of 700 followers. Local officials followed suit with public denunciations. Six Pure Hoa Hao followers, a related group, alleged that they were assaulted by police in Dong Thap Province and fined for conducting services in March.

In Hanoi in January 2010, several hundred police destroyed a large concrete cross that had been constructed at the top of a large hill near the Dong Chiem parish. At the base of the hill is a Catholic cemetery.

In November 2009 in Da Lat, the government demolished a portion of a Catholic seminary built in 1964 and seized by authorities in 1980. The Church had repeatedly requested that the seminary be returned to church control for use as a training facility for local priests. The government instead decided to transform the property into a cultural park. Similarly, in Vinh Long Province, authorities demolished the Congregation of Saint Paul of Chartres monastery to transform the property into a public square. Bishop Thomas Nguyen Van Tan of Vinh Long strongly condemned the action stating that he only learned about the demolition decision after reading about it in a local newspaper.

In Quang Binh Province in September 2009, several Catholic parishioners were released after being detained on charges related to earlier protests at the disputed ruins of the Tam Toa Church. Also in September the government completed restoration of the main bell tower which had been damaged by bombings in 1968.

In September 2009 an ethnic minority preacher with the Good News Mission Church in Phu Yen Province was criticized by commune and district police for leading an unregistered church operating an illegal Bible school. The Assemblies of God Church in Nghe An Province experienced similar difficulties in July 2009 when local officials and police attempted to close a small ethnic minority congregation and discouraged evangelizing of other ethnic minorities.

In July 2009 a Redemptorist monastery in Nha Trang City, Khanh Hoa Province, was demolished under government approval. The building was constructed in 1959, but was seized by the government in 1978. Local Redemptorists had long petitioned for return of the facility, but received no response to their petition from authorities.

Protestants also faced land rights issues. The government returned a small number of previously confiscated properties to recognized Protestant organizations, but other disputes continued. The SECV continued to seek restitution for more than 250 properties; other denominations active in the south before 1975 also had claims.

Similarly, a Cao Dai temple in Ninh Thuan Province was demolished in April 2010 to accommodate a new nursery school. The temple was built in 1950 and was closed by the government in 1987. It had been used as a temporary government office building for two years before being abandoned. The local Cao Dai had repeatedly petitioned provincial officials to return the property without success.

Although the Ordinance encourages religious organizations to conduct charitable activities in education and health care, 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. Operating without a legal basis, however, created some difficulties for the church. Two shelters were unable to obtain legal birth records and public school enrollment for the children under its care. Charitable activities of religious groups in the northern section of the country were comparatively more restricted.

Police regularly discouraged worshipers from visiting temples and facilities affiliated with the unrecognized Pure Hoa Hao Church in An Giang, Vinh Long, Dong Thap, and Can Tho, especially on church holidays related to the lunar calendar and the anniversary of the death of the founder of Hoa Hao Buddhism.

Some ethnic minority worshippers in the Central Highlands--particularly in areas suspected to be affiliated with the "Dega Church"--continued to be prevented from gathering to worship. The number of reported incidents was significantly lower than in previous reporting periods and appeared to reflect individual local bias rather than central government policy. In some instances the local officials involved apologized and were reprimanded or fired.

As in previous years, there were indications that provincial officials rebuked local authorities for harassing house churches in contravention of the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism. In a few incidents in Tra Vinh Province, local authorities reportedly harassed groups that submitted registration applications. Other Protestant churches in Ha Giang, Quang Ngai, Long An, Binh Duong, and Dong Nai also reported difficulties from local officials after submitting church registration applications.

### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

Reports of abuses of religious freedom remained at a consistent level compared with the previous reporting period. Some religious believers continued to experience harassment or repression, particularly those who had not applied for or been granted legal sanction. In a number of instances, local officials forced church gatherings to cease, closed unregistered house churches, and pressured individuals to renounce their religious beliefs.

The implementation of the legal framework on religion remained an uneven process, especially in the North and Northwest Highlands. Many pastors and priests reported that police and other authorities had not implemented fully these revised legal codes. Some Protestants in these areas reported that local officials used legal pretexts to prevent or complicate registration.

Several small house churches affiliated with the Inter-Evangelistic Movement (IEM) continued to report difficulties in several locations in Dien Bien Province, where police in past years actively broke up meetings of worshippers and local authorities refused to register IEM meeting points, and authorities pressured followers to abandon their faith.

Nguyen Thanh Nam from Hoa Xuan Ward, Cam Le District in Da Nang was allegedly interrogated and beaten on two occasions during police detention over his planning and participation in the May 2010 funeral of Ho Nu and burial in a local Catholic cemetery. Local officials had earlier announced an agreement with Catholic officials to close the cemetery for further burials, and to use the larger area for ecotourism development. As police intervened to stop the burial service, the protesting parishioners reportedly attacked police in an effort to enter the cemetery, and violence between police and parishioners ensued.

In May and June, two small house churches affiliated with the unrecognized United Gospel Outreach Church reported local officials and police disrupted services in Long An and Tien Giang Provinces.

Two Protestant churches in Hue, a Free Methodist Church and Gospel of Christ Church, reported harassment in on four occasions between December 2009 and June 2010 when police and local officials closed services multiple times and accused local pastors of violating the law for "gathering illegally." Lay preachers and parishioners were reportedly questioned by police, and local officials refused to recognize either small congregation due to the fact that the denominations were not recognized by the national government. Both churches had earlier applied for registration but were denied.

In May 2010 the UBCV in Da Nang was prohibited by police from holding Vesak Day celebrations to honor Buddha's birthday. Approximately 300 followers were denied entry into the Giac Minh Pagoda for the celebrations. In Ho Chi Minh City the UBCV experienced an overall decrease in interference by government officials during the reporting period but experienced heightened police observation during Vesak Day activities. Police monitored the celebrations on May 28 at the Giac Hoa and Lien Tri pagodas but did not intervene. UBCV officials claimed attendance by followers at the celebrations was lower than normal, due to the increased police presence. Some followers stated that they were questioned by police officers after celebrations at the Lien Tri pagoda. In contrast UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do traveled without difficulty to Quoc An Pagoda in Hue and delivered a sermon to approximately 700 followers about the importance of Buddha's birthday. Security officials did not intervene and the UBCV erected a large platform and hung UBCV banners from the pagoda without incident.

In May 2010 a priest with the unrecognized Cao Dai faith in Tay Ninh was convicted for "slandering an on-duty official" according to the MPS-affiliated *People's Police* newspaper. The priest was arrested in November 2009 after criticizing several police officers for actions against religious followers of the unrecognized Cao Dai faith. The priest in 2008 had led a protest of over 300 followers of the unrecognized Cao Dai faith to the Cao Dai Holy See in order to denounce the current leader of the official organization and demand the officially recognized church return properties, including the Cao Dai Holy See, to the unrecognized church.

In Da Nang in May, police and local officials twice visited the local congregation of the United Presbyterian Church to close services due to the fact that the church was not recognized nationally, according to church officials. The local congregation had applied multiple times for local registration without success. Earlier in July 2009, police questioned five visiting pastors affiliated with the church and accused them of illegal evangelization. The *Da Nang Police* newspaper reported the case and claimed that nine books on religion were confiscated and that police were continuing to investigate the case.

A foreign pastor of the Korean Baptist Community in Ho Chi Minh City was questioned by police in May and asked to discontinue assistance to the unregistered United Baptist Church. Police threatened to cancel the pastor's visa although they did not do so.

In Hai Phong Province in May, dozens of individuals were temporarily detained for participating in a house church Protestant vigil at a downtown stadium.

In April representatives from the Plum Village community headquartered in France met with the representatives from the Vietnamese Embassy in France to discuss the community's activities in the country. Twice, Vietnam's Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Thanh Son also offered to meet with their leader, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, but Thich Nhat Hanh did not accept the offer. In February 2009 Thich Nhat Hanh had called on the government to release all political prisoners, to disband the "religious police," and to establish an "independent Buddhist church" not connected to politics. Violence began in June 2009 when a group of vigilantes attacked the Plum Village meditation center and dormitories in the Bat Nha monastery compound in Lam Dong Province. The attack occurred in the presence of uniformed and plainclothes police, who did nothing to prevent it. Resident Bat Nha monks, opposed to the Plum Village community's

presence in the pagoda, isolated the group and cut off their water and electricity from June until the end of September. CRA instructed local authorities to evict the Plum Village community from the pagoda, failed to prevent the attacks and punish those involved, and appeared to favor one side in the dispute. On September 27 a large mob, in coordination and alleged participation with plainclothes police, beat and forcibly evicted approximately 150 Plum Village monks from the Bat Nha pagoda. The monks then sought refuge at the nearby Phuoc Hue pagoda. On September 28 the remaining 200 Plum Village nuns were also forcibly evicted and joined the monks at Phuoc Hue. In November two pagodas in Dong Nai and Lam Dong provinces petitioned the central VBS and CRA to allow them to sponsor the Plum Village monks and nuns. The CRA rejected these petitions, claiming that the Plum Village community "failed to obey the law" and "caused disunity" among Buddhists, ordering the Lam Dong provincial VBS to force the monks and nuns to disband and return to their home provinces by December 31, 2009. The Plum Village community of monks and nuns voluntarily left the pagoda in late December. Another group of 21 Plum Village monks and nuns were forcibly evicted from a pagoda in Khanh Hoa Province on November 29. Several hundred monks and nuns from the community left the country in December 2009 following harassment from authorities in several provinces. The leader of the Vietnamese members of the community remained under the observation of authorities in Hanoi. At the end of the reporting period, many of the Plum Village community had left for Thailand and remained there.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Vietnam alleged that a congregation of 200 followers in Binh Phuoc Province was harassed by police and prevented from celebrating Easter services.

In a period between July 2009 and March 2010 Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton, the head of the Full Gospel Church in Thanh Hoa Province, reported repeated and extended harassment and beatings by local and provincial police at several different Full Gospel meeting points in Thanh Hoa. Local officials interrupted numerous church gatherings, detaining and physically abusing church members and leadership, including Pastor Ton and his family. Despite Pastor Ton's repeated requests, local officials did not investigate the actions of security officials and those hired to conduct the physical attacks. Pastor Ton was a close affiliate of dissidents Le Thi Cong Nhan and Do Nam Hai and a member of the "Bloc 8406" political movement.

In January 2010 following police demolition of the large concrete cross at the Dong Chiem Catholic parish, several hundred parishioners protested the action. Police dispersed the crowd with tear gas and beat approximately a dozen individuals. The Hanoi Archdiocese issued a statement calling the police actions "sacrilege" and "savage." Archbishop Kiet visited the injured. Following the altercation, followers erected a similar cross made out of bamboo, which was later removed by security officials. Two weeks following the original incident, a Catholic monk affiliated with the Redemptorist Thai Ha parish in Hanoi was beaten unconscious by police as he tried to enter the parish near where the cross was demolished. In February a group of nuns and other Catholics from Ho Chi Minh City making a pilgrimage to the parish were harassed by police and denied entry. Six Catholic parishioners involved in the original protest were detained and later released. The government alleged that the cross had been constructed without permission on land controlled by the military and was not removed upon request. The

government claimed that no parishioners were injured in the demolition of the cross and that those who were detained had assaulted police.

In January 2010 in Phu Yen Province, two lay preachers affiliated with the Good News Mission Church, Ksor Y Du and Kpa Y Ko, were arrested for alleged connections with the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO) and for opposing the government. Following the end of the Vietnam War, FULRO led an armed guerilla campaign that sought the creation of an independent Montagnard state in the Central Highlands. Ksor Y Du had allegedly been handcuffed and dragged behind a motorbike to the police station. In response to questions from the embassy and consulate surrounding the arrests, CRA officials claimed that both individuals had prior convictions for "illegally crossing the border" and had served three-year prison sentences. CRA asserted that both had long-time connections with FULRO, even following their release from prison less than two years prior, and had been "embroiled by hostile forces" in a plot to encourage a separatist movement by sowing division among ethnic communities. Both remained in detention pending trial at the end of the reporting period.

In Dong Nai Province, a dispute between representatives of the officially recognized Cao Dai Church and an unrecognized congregation led to the eviction of the unrecognized congregation, critical of the Cao Dai Holy See in Tay Ninh, from a Cao Dai meeting house long controlled by the unrecognized congregation. In December 2009 members of the official executive council forcefully removed the unrecognized followers and their possessions from the meeting house in the presence of local authorities and police. Leaders of the officially recognized Cao Dai faith acknowledged the divisions and said that the unrecognized congregation had been asked to disband and return the property several times previously but without success. The congregation was evicted in January 2010.

In January 2010 in Vinh Long Province, the head of the Good News Mission Church organized a two-week Bible training class for 19 lay pastors at a prayer house in Tan Phu Commune of Tam Binh District in Vinh Long Province. The class was interrupted multiple times by local officials who directed participants to leave since the church had not received national registration. The pastors refused to vacate and police forcefully escorted them to the police station for interrogation. The group was held throughout the day for questioning and was escorted back to the prayer house in the evening for a public denunciation session of community leaders for breaking the law by gathering illegally and resisting government officials. The owner of the prayer house was fined \$53 (VND 1 million) and the head of the church was instructed not to inform outsiders about the incident.

In December a newly-formed United Baptist Church congregation in Dong Van District in Ha Giang Province was harassed by local officials and was told to close services due to their lack of received national registration. The congregation had been denied local registration despite filing repeated applications.

Police entered the United Gospel Outreach Church in Ho Chi Minh City in November, instructed the leader of the church to remove the cross from the church building, and directed the church to cease meeting at the facility. The church had attempted numerous times to register since 2006 but local officials repeatedly denied their applications.

In August 2009 in Ho Chi Minh City, local officials and police disrupted a church service of the Independent Baptist Church of Love. Police threatened all parishioners with fines. They accused the pastor of spreading Protestantism illegally and directed services cease until the congregation was registered. The pastor stated that he had twice attempted to register his congregation with no response from local authorities.

In August 2009 the Protestant Vietnam People Christian Evangelical Fellowship Church in Kien Giang Province alleged regular assaults from local thugs under orders from provincial police. Local police regularly questioned the leader of the church. The church submitted an application for registration in August, but officials denied registration stating that the church did not meet the criteria for registration.

In July 2009 house churches affiliated with the Ecclesia Revival Church in Hanoi and the Agape Baptist Church in Hung Yen were harassed by local officials and police and were told not to meet again under threat of arrest.

In July 2009, a pastor from the Good News Mission Church in Dak Lak Province was publicly denounced and sentenced to three months of "local re-education" for conducting training for ethnic minority church leaders at his home. The sentence required attendance at political courses and government permission before traveling. Approximately 120 persons, mostly local officials and police, attended the trial which was later televised. The pastor had previously applied for permission to conduct the training but was denied. Police also interrupted services at a church service, seizing hymnals and detaining the pastor and several parishioners for questioning.

Lau Nhia Po was arrested and later released for killing his mother in February 2009 because of her conversion to Christianity. Following his brief imprisonment and release, he allegedly killed another Christian for religious reasons. After repeated inquiries by foreign diplomats, he was arrested in July 2009 and convicted and sentenced to five years imprisonment in Ha Giang Province.

Individuals and churches affiliated with Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, including the Vietnam People's Christian Evangelical Fellowship Church (UKCC-VPCEF) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Vietnam, continued to face difficulties from local officials due to Pastor Chinh's strident denunciations of the government and communism. The government continued to claim that Pastor Chinh used his position to conduct political activities.

On April 5, 2009, echoing previous incidents of violence against Khmer ethnic minority Protestants in Tra Vinh Province by fellow Khmer, a Protestant lay pastor affiliated with the UKCC-VPCEF in Tra Vinh Province was killed, allegedly by other members of the Khmer ethnic minority. The government claimed the victim was not a religious believer and reported that he died in a traffic accident. However, several other sources confirmed that he was a lay pastor and was beaten to death after conducting evangelistic activities. Some reports alleged the violence was instigated by local Buddhist leaders and sanctioned by local officials. Virtually all Protestants throughout the province experienced harassment and difficulties in holding services. The government failed to prosecute those responsible for the death.

In November 2008 local officials from Minh Ngoc Commune of Bac Me District in Ha Giang Province threatened to fine congregants \$3 (VND 50,000) and deacons \$29 (VND 500,000) each if they continued meeting.

Despite recent improvements, some members of the Full Gospel Church in Hieu Tu Commune of Tieu Can District in Tra Vinh Province alleged that local government agencies, such as the Women's Union, and hunger-elimination and poverty-relief related agencies continued to deny Protestants the right to conduct services or asked Protestant followers to renounce their faith as a precondition for assistance.

In the Central Highlands, SECV congregations in some districts of Dak Lak Province reported slow progress in registering new meeting points. In November 2008 a Protestant house church in Dak Lak Province agreed to the request of local authorities to stop operating an in-residence Bible school for lay pastors.

Catholic priest Pham Van Loi continued to live under conditions resembling house arrest reportedly because of his political beliefs or attempts to form political organizations, despite the apparent lack of any official charges against him. The CRA asserted that Father Loi was not under house arrest and that the government did not restrict his religious activities. The movement of a number of other UBCV, Cao Dai, Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Protestant dignitaries and believers was occasionally restricted or monitored by police.

#### *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 contained a similarly worded statement. Although government officials stated 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 attempts by local authorities to force renunciations continued to decrease. A few incidents were reported during in central Kon Tum Province, Southern Tra Vinh Province, and Northern Dien Bien and Lao Cai Provinces.

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 Pha Xom Village in Xa Dung commune of Dien Bien Dong District in Dien Bien Province, in June 2010, the village chief asked several Protestant households to renounce their faith by December 2010 and return to traditional beliefs, or face expulsion from the village. The individuals claimed they were also fined \$10.50 (VND 200,000).

In Dien Bien Dong District of Dien Bien Province in December 2009, district officials pressured 10 Christian convert families in the Ho Kaw Village in Nam Son Commune to return to their traditional beliefs. Three ethnic Protestant H'mongs, Sung Cua Po, Sung A Sinh, and Hang A Xa, who refused to renounce Christianity were allegedly detained, handcuffed, and beaten by police in order to force them to renounce their faith. Following the beatings, most Christians in the

village stopped practicing their religion under pressure from local officials and family members. It was alleged that each paid fines of 33 pounds (15 kilograms) of pork and alcohol to gain release. Later in December local police and authorities allegedly took Po and his wife to meet members of their extended family to exert further pressure on them to return to traditional beliefs. After additional police threats, Po signed a renunciation of Christianity. In March, Po and his family fled his home after continued abuse from authorities and family members, and have not been seen since that time.

In early January 2009 ECVN leaders in Lao Cai Province reported local officials in the Ban Me Commune told Protestants to renounce their faith or face fines.

In December 2008 local officials from Sin Ho District in Nam Han Commune of Lai Chau Province pressured a lay deacon and 32 Protestant families to renounce their faith, according to church officials.

### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

Some improvements in respect for religious freedom continued during the reporting period. In many areas Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai, reported an increase in religious activity and observance. Compared to previous reporting periods, the government continued to ease restrictions placed upon most religious groups and expanded the number of religions that received national registration. The changes were primarily the result of continued implementation of revisions to the legal framework governing religion instituted in 2004 and 2005, as well as 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, including increased numbers of registrations and growth in the number of persons attending services.

Thousands of new church leaders -- Catholic, Buddhist and Protestant -- were trained with government approval. Specifically, over 100 Protestant pastors were trained during the reporting period. The central government continued to train, inform, and encourage provincial and local authorities to comply with regulations under the legal framework on religion. Nonetheless, actual implementation remained inconsistent at those levels.

During the reporting period, the government permitted large religious gatherings, such as annual Catholic celebrations at the La Vang Catholic sanctuary. Attendance at Christmas and Easter celebrations throughout the country exceeded the previous year's figures, and large celebrations were held in honor of Vesak in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and many other cities. 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 also occurred without incident.

Five denominations affiliated with the umbrella association Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship organized a Christmas rally at an open field in Ho Chi Minh City. The denominations included the registered Vietnam Baptist Convention (Southern Baptist); the recognized Assembly of God; and three unregistered house church groups (United Presbyterian Church, United Gospel

Outreach Church and the Full Gospel Church). Approximately 40,000 persons gathered to celebrate, and included an appeal for participants to become Christians. The event went smoothly and received positive coverage in the state-controlled press. A Christmas celebration in Hanoi attracted 12,000 adherents. These two events represented the largest gatherings of Protestants in the history of the country. Other large Christmas celebrations with 4,000-5,000 thousand adherents were held in Nam Dinh, Da Nang. Smaller events were held openly in other cities throughout the country.

Catholics also held several large-scale Christmas and Easter Masses in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and throughout the southern part of the country with thousands of individuals participating in each event. Several provinces in the Northwest Highlands, in areas known for greater restrictions, allowed celebration of Christmas Mass for the first time. Mirroring large-scale Christmas celebrations, thousands of Protestants and Catholics participated in Easter services throughout the country, including in the Central Highlands.

In November more than 100,000 Catholics from throughout the country gathered in Ha Nam Province outside Hanoi to open the Jubilee year and mark the church's formal 350-year hierarchal presence in the country. Cardinal Etchegaray, Vice-Dean of the College of Cardinals at the Holy See; Cardinal Vingt-Trois, president of the French Episcopal Conference; and Cardinal Bernard Francis Law from the Vatican joined Ho Chi Minh City Cardinal Pham Minh Man, 30 Vietnamese bishops from all 26 dioceses, and 1,200 priests from the northern section of the country at the celebration.

In January more than 70,000 Hoa Hao followers marked the birthday of the faith's founder, Huynh Phu So, by gathering near his ancestral home in An Hoa Tu, An Giang Province.

In October over 100,000 Cao Dai adherents gathered in Tay Ninh at the Cao Dai Church's Holy See to hold an annual banquet in honor of the Great Mother and Nine Goddesses of the Dieu Tri Palace. Cao Dai leaders also discussed various humanitarian initiatives to assist poor families in the province.

In December the government assisted as the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha hosted an International Buddhist Women Conference in Ho Chi Minh City. Over 2,000 Buddhist women participants from more than 47 countries and territories worldwide took part in the 11th Sakyadhita International Conference of Buddhist Women. Vice President Nguyen Thi Doan presided over the opening ceremony of the conference. The government also facilitated the display of the relics of the Buddha from India at a pagoda in Ninh Binh. The vice president, several vice ministers, and numerous members of the National Assembly were present for the arrival of the relics on a chartered flight from India.

The government continued to register new religious organizations during the reporting period. The government recognized seven additional religious organizations, bringing the total to 34. These organizations were affiliated with 11 recognized religions (Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, the Four Gratitudes, Threefold Enlightened Truth Path, Threefold Southern Tradition, and the Baha'i Community). The government also has granted national registration to two religious organizations: one distinct

religious group, the Mysterious Fragrance from Precious Mountains; and one Protestant denomination, the Assemblies of God. In addition approximately 60 ECVN congregations were registered with local authorities. In total approximately 200 ECVN congregations have been registered.

The ECVN Church continued to grow in the Northwest Highlands, especially in Dien Bien Province. Although local and provincial officials registered only a handful of congregations in Dien Bien and Son La Provinces during the reporting period, most of the remaining congregations waiting action on their applications were able to conduct religious services and activities without incident.

Most SECV congregations and meeting places in the Central Highlands were able to register their activities with local officials and operated without significant harassment. All SECV congregations and meeting points in Gia Lai have been registered by provincial officials. During the reporting period, 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 12 new Protestant SECV congregations, and 16 additional SECV meeting points in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc Province were registered. In Gia Lai the SECV reported all of its congregations and meeting points had registered, for a total of 49 congregations and more than 230 meeting points. One congregation may have multiple meeting points.

The SECV also opened a number of new churches in Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Dak Nong provinces. The SECV continued to conduct Bible classes to train preachers in the region, a step toward formal recognition as pastors. Ordination of new pastors was a key part of formal recognition of additional SECV churches. In Dak Lak Province alone, the SECV has trained and ordained several hundred lay pastors.

The government authorized construction of nearly 50 Protestant churches and 25 prayer houses, including many in the Central and Northern Highlands. For the first time in the Central Highland Provinces of Dak Lak and Dak Nong, the government facilitated construction of large SECV church buildings able to seat nearly 1,000 followers in Buon Ma Thuot in March and in Dak Nong in November. The ECVN constructed a large church for an ethnic Dzaio congregation in the Northern Highland Lang Son Province. The Catholic Church also constructed dozens of prayer houses in the Central Highlands and new churches throughout the country. In 2009 CRA reported that over 190 new places of worship were built and many others received land use certificates authorizing construction of new facilities.

The Vietnam Baptist Convention (Grace Southern Baptist) celebrated 50 years in the country in November. Bobby Welch, the former president of the U.S.-based Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and current Ambassador for Global Evangelical Relations for the SBC Executive Committee, attended the celebrations and delivered the keynote address. In meetings with senior leaders of the CPV and CRA, Welch applauded steps taken by the government to expand religious freedom. The Vietnam Christian Fellowship Church with over 200,000 members held its first National Congress in September with over 1,000 pastors and parishioner participants from 50 provinces, half of which were from the Northern Highlands. At the Congress the church

elected a new national executive committee and adopted a national charter. Similarly, the Four Debts of Gratitude Church also held its first National Congress in May, elected a new national executive committee, and adopted a national charter.

Police and other officials in several areas of the country worked with house church leaders to inform them of the regulations on religion. The CRA conducted numerous training sessions in the Northwest and Central Highlands and other areas, including in Lao Cai, Phu Yen, and Thanh Hoa Provinces, to educate provincial and district officials as well as religious leaders about the religious regulations to ensure that they would "implement these policies in an orderly fashion." The CRA invited the Institute for Global Engagement, a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) to participate in the training course in Lao Cai. ECVN contacts in the Northwest Highlands confirmed that authorities allowed nearly all unregistered congregations to worship in their homes and to meet openly, in accordance with the Prime Minister's 2005 Instruction.

The government also demonstrated willingness to allow individual religious organizations to train the next generation of religious leaders. Catholics, Buddhists, and many Protestant religions expanded large-scale seminary level programs. The Vietnam Baptist Convention continued to administer a full-time four-year theological seminary program. The Baptist Convention offered theological courses at regional hubs in Ho Chi Minh City, the Mekong Delta, Da Nang, Hanoi, and Hai Phong. More than 100 pastors nationwide participated in this program, which granted a bachelor's degree in theology.

Since formal recognition in 2007, the United World Mission Church (UWMC) has trained more than 210 pastors. Because most UWMC lay pastors were ethnic minorities with jobs in agriculture, the UWMC created a part-time training program in Da Nang 10 days a month for five months. In 2009 and 2010, the UWMC facilitated several refresher training courses for many of these lay preachers. The Committee for Religious Affairs supported the training of pastors by registering the program, assisting in creation of the curriculum, and providing speakers and funding. Twelve pastors also received master's degrees in theology through online study with a theological institute in California. Two of these individuals continued their studies and received PhDs from the same institute. The UWMC also administered a full-time four-year theological seminary program serving 30 students scheduled to graduate with a bachelor of theology degree in 2010.

During the reporting period, the SECV continued to train and ordain many new pastors, including in the Central Highlands. Likewise, the ECVN also held numerous training activities for hundreds of ethnic minority lay pastors (H'mong and Dzao).

During the reporting period the Catholic Church ordained five new bishops; Ban Me Thuot, Phat Diem, Xuan Loc, Quy Nhon, Hung Hoa, and Vinh. The church promoted or transferred four other bishops. The Catholic Church reported continued easing government control over church assignment of new clergy, and many new priests entered seminary and were ordained. The government no longer restricted the number of students permitted to enter seminary each year. The Catholic Church operated seven seminaries, with 1,500 students enrolled, as well as a new special training program for older students. Demand for entrance into the seminary was high and

there is a multiple year wait for prospective seminarians to enroll. Local authorities must approve all students before enrollment and the students must register with the government before ordination as priests. All of those who completed training were allowed ordination. Church authorities acknowledged that they lacked the internal capacity to open sufficient additional seminaries to meet demand for priests serving the growing Catholic population.

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 exceeded expectations and the center remained at capacity. The government also continued to allow travel of hundreds of priests overseas for continued education. Of the country's 5,200 priests, 1,200 work abroad. The Catholic Church estimated that the country was third in the world in sending Catholic priests overseas, after the Philippines and India.

During the reporting period, the government returned five major properties to the Catholic Church: the Tri Chinh Seminary in the Phat Diem Diocese, the Hoang Nguyen Seminary in the Hanoi Archdiocese, the So Kien Seminary in the Hanoi Archdiocese, a Pastoral Center in the Dalat Diocese, and the Khoai Dong Church in the Bui Chu Diocese. The government had previously returned the La Vang Pilgrimage Center in 2008 in the Hue Archdiocese, one of the most important historical church properties in the country.

The VBS operated four university-level institutes, eight colleges, 30 intermediate schools, and 25 primary schools that taught Buddhism adherents and monks-in-training. The VBS reported approximately 50,000 monks nationwide. The largest university-level institute in Hanoi had approximately 1,500 monks and nuns attending. In May the VBS broke ground on a new \$6.3 million (VND 120 billion) Buddhist pagoda and training center outside of Hanoi.

In 2008 the first full classes began at the new university-equivalent academy focused entirely on Theravada Buddhism in Can Tho. The VBS opened the university in 2007. The government provided land for the building and expansion for a larger academy. During the reporting period, the academy enrolled 240 students and its first class was scheduled to graduate in 2011. In addition the government expanded the Pali language secondary school in Soc Trang Province and continued to provide Pali language training materials to Khmer Krom monks to encourage local Pali language training institutes at pagodas throughout the Mekong Delta. The government covered tuition for the Khmer monks at all universities in the country, as it did for all education of Khmer ethnic minorities. The school has trained 823 students and currently has 150 students. Both the academy and the school were enrolled at full capacity and held competitive entrance exams for those seeking enrollment.

Many pastors of Protestant denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Baptists, UGOC, and Assemblies of God have not joined the SECV or ECVN because of doctrinal differences. These and other Protestant denominations reported they were able to practice openly and with the knowledge of local officials, particularly in urban areas. While there were exceptions, harassment by officials of unrecognized house churches that belong to denominations not associated with the SECV or ECVN continued to decline. The government held discussions about registration and recognition procedures with leaders of a number of

Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The ECVN continued to grow, particularly in the Northwest Highlands and in Dien Bien Province and Son La Province. Although local and provincial officials registered only a handful of Protestant congregations during the reporting period, congregations in the two provinces reported an easing of restrictions and were able to conduct religious services and activities without incident. As in the previous reporting period, these congregations celebrated Christmas and Easter without difficulty, a marked improvement from past years. The Jewish Community also celebrated its first circumcision of a Vietnamese child.

Despite protests surrounding land disputes, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the government continued to improve during the reporting period. For the first time, the president traveled to the Vatican and met the Pope in December 2009. The Vatican called it "a significant stage in the progress of bilateral relations with Vietnam."

Catholic leaders regularly traveled to the Vatican for consultations. In June 2009 30 Catholic Bishops met with the Pope and presented a request for the Pope to visit Vietnam in 2010. The government also facilitated the first-ever meeting of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Asia in Ho Chi Minh City in October, which was attended by 40 cardinals and bishops from Bangladesh, India, Japan, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan Thailand, and Vietnam.

In contrast to previous years, in Son La Province, Catholics were allowed to openly conduct Easter and Christmas Mass for thousands of Catholics at several large house churches, and a priest was also allowed to conduct Mass. The priest was also allowed to serve communion during Mass at an unregistered meeting point every other Saturday with more than 100 Catholics regularly in attendance.

On June 23 and 24, 2010, the government and the Vatican held the second round of discussions in Rome under a newly created "Joint Vietnam-Holy See Working Group" on re-establishing diplomatic relations. The two sides highlighted that positive progress has been made in the religious life in the country, discussed plans for future talks, and agreed to a Vatican appointment of a non-resident Representative of the Holy See for Vietnam. The government maintained regular dialogue with the Vatican on other issues, such as church leadership, organizational activities, land issues, and interfaith dialogue.

In May 2010 in Hanoi, more than 2,000 nuns and monks, together with the deputy prime minister, the chairman of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, and representatives of the Hanoi Municipal People's Committee, and Buddhist monasteries participated in Vesak Day celebrations. Similar large-scale celebrations of high-ranking government officials and thousands of followers were held in Ho Chi Minh City, Vinh Long Province, Ninh Thuan Province, Hau Giang Province, and An Giang Province.

In May 2010 Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem announced continued preparations for the World Buddhist Summit scheduled for November 2010 in Hanoi. Other related meetings will be held in Ha Long Bay, Quang Ninh, and Ninh Binh Provinces.

Well-known American evangelist Luis Palau visited the country in March, and the government approved his participation in a training conference for over 500 Protestant pastors in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, representing nearly all Protestant church denominations in the country. Several hundred other pastors participated via live Internet feed. In May the Full Gospel Businessman's Fellowship International held its second annual conference in Ho Chi Minh City. The event attracted over 100 businessmen, including many foreign residents.

Many religious groups expanded their charitable efforts with government approval. Buddhists, Catholics, Cao Dai, and Protestants engaged in aid programs contributing over \$15 million collectively. Their efforts included assisting persons with HIV/AIDS, disaster relief, and work with orphans and at-risk children. A large number of faith-based NGOs also conducted charitable activities supported by private donors, international organizations, and foreign governments.

The Catholic charity Caritas held training courses for social workers assisting people living with HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. They also conducted disaster relief operations providing assistance to typhoon victims. Caritas' total contributions through the end of 2009 were close to \$500,000 (VND 9.2 billion) and were projected at \$1.15 million (VND 21.84 billion) for 2010. Catholic Relief Services also marked 15 years of operation in the country in March 2009. In Ho Chi Minh City and Hue, the Catholic Church joined with the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in supporting HIV/AIDS hospices and treatment centers and providing counseling services to young persons. The church also operated a shelter for HIV-positive mothers and HIV-infected children. The Ho Chi Minh City government and the Catholic Church continued to discuss the process for gaining official approval of new social work initiatives.

Similarly, officials in Thai Binh Province encouraged Catholic efforts on HIV/AIDS treatment and caring for the disabled. Hai Phong authorities encouraged Catholic Church support on drug addiction treatment and HIV/AIDS programs, and the Catholic Diocese of Nam Dinh operated an orphanage. The VBS also engaged in humanitarian activities across the country, including antidrug and child welfare programs, and HIV/AIDS programs. The VBS runs numerous low-income health clinics throughout the country. The city of Hanoi also approved a number of VBS-run temples to operate 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. In Hue Catholic nuns and VBS monks and nuns joined together to manage an HIV/AIDS treatment facility.

There were also numerous interfaith efforts in the charitable arena. Buddhists, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Catholics, and Protestant churches continued joint work in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In October the VFF, VBS, and UNICEF hosted a nationwide conference on strategies to fight HIV/AIDS, assist victims of the disease, and have trained monks and nuns across the country. In Ho Chi Minh City, Buddhists and Catholics worked closely together to assist street children, orphans, the poor, AIDS patients, and victims of natural disasters. These efforts were concentrated in 115 centers that assisted the disabled and the elderly and 23 centers focused on

assisting the mentally ill, drug addicts, and AIDS patients. Buddhists and Catholic leaders also worked together to raise awareness about environmental protection. In a clinic in Kien Giang Province, Catholic and Buddhist doctors worked together, and Cao Dai followers produced herbal medicines. Protestants visited the sick and provided gifts, and Hoa Hao followers provided daily free meals for the 300 hundred patients and their relatives.

The Hoa Hao Executive Council also continued to be very active in local charitable and development projects, including building upwards of 800 houses for impoverished families regardless of religious affiliation. The faith also spent significant resources on managing local health clinics, and in 2009 spent more than \$2 million (VND 39 billion) on charitable activities. In 2010, they expected to spend approximately \$1.5 million (VND 29 billion) on similar efforts.

The president of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), a U.S. NGO, met with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem to discuss the importance of religious freedom and to deepen ties. The IGE delegation also travelled to Dien Bien Province to meet with local officials concerning the expansion of religious freedom and to meet with an unregistered house church. The former General Secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, and former Congressman Bob Edgar, also led a large interfaith delegation to the country to examine the effect of the legacies of the Vietnam War.

Some cities and provinces such as Can Tho, Hue, and others actively encouraged interfaith charitable activities. Can Tho City hosted a regional interfaith day on five years of implementing the decree on religion and invited leaders of the various Protestant, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Buddhist, and Catholic religions in the province. Similarly, Soc Trang Province and others hosted interfaith days to fight poverty where multiple faith groups raised money together for the poor and completed service projects.

The government continued to publicize its professed policy of religious freedom and tolerance through the bureaucratic organs of the state. In July 2009 the Standing Secretary of the CPV Central Committee and Politburo member, Truong Tan Sang, oversaw a Party Conference to review the five-year anniversary on implementation of the CPV resolution allowing for increased religious diversity. The chairperson of the CPV Mass Mobilization Committee and Sang both stressed the need to further publicize and disseminate CPV resolutions on religious affairs to ensure that religion-related laws and regulations are fully implemented. The CRA continued to train more provincial propaganda cadres from the Northwest Highlands to disseminate policy information on religious freedom to reduce societal tensions between followers of traditional ethnic minority beliefs and Protestant converts.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were few reported instances of societal discrimination or violence based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period.

The practice of Protestantism in the Central Highlands was complicated by the presence of "Dega" separatists, who have advocated an autonomous or independent homeland for indigenous persons in the area, particularly in Gia Lai, Dak Nong, and Dak Lak Provinces. The relationship between the Dega movement and Protestant believers belonging to the SECV was tense in some parts of the Central Highlands. Dega activists reportedly threatened that SECV pastors would not be allowed to serve in a "Dega State" unless they abandoned their ties to the SECV. Other Protestant pastors have accused the Dega movement of manipulating religion for political purposes.

Protestant Khmers also reported harassment, intimidation and, in some cases, property damage and beatings by Khmer Krom Buddhists in certain districts of Tra Vinh Province. They reported that authorities did little to prevent the incidents and, in some cases, may have participated in or instigated the actions.

Cardinal Pham Minh Man in Ho Chi Minh City hosted an interfaith dialogue and Christmas dinner at the archdiocese where he invited leaders of Protestant churches, Buddhists, Muslims, and Cao Dai. The cardinal issued a public apology on behalf of the Vietnamese Catholic Church for previous misunderstandings and called for a new era of interfaith dialogue.

#### **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 CPV leaders and government officials, including authorities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the 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 throughout the country and routinely visited religious leaders throughout the country.

Secretary Clinton, in meetings with government officials during the past year, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Religious freedom also was a major focus of the 2009 U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue. The Deputy Secretary of State, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, the U.S. ambassador, the consul general in Ho Chi Minh City, and other embassy and consulate general officers also raised religious freedom issues with senior officials, including the president, 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 throughout the country, and other officials, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands and Mekong Delta.

Embassy and consulate general officials traveled regularly in country, notably the Central and Northwest Highlands and Mekong Delta, to monitor the religious freedom environment and frequently stressed to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship.

Embassy 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 and embassy officials raised specific cases of government harassment against Catholics, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the Plum Village Buddhist Community, unrecognized Hoa Hao and Cao Dai churches, and Protestant churches with the CRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Public Security. The ambassador also requested the government investigate alleged abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. Embassy officials also called for the registration and reopening of house churches that had been closed and peaceful resolution of longstanding property disputes.

In the case of the Plum Village Buddhist Community, consulate officers visited their pagoda following the outbreak of violence in the Central Highlands and embassy officers met with the head of the Plum Village Community in Vietnam. The ambassador and deputy chief of mission met more than a dozen times with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and the CRA to advocate for tolerance, registration of the community, and an end to harassment. Secretary Clinton and senior officials from the Department of State raised concerns about treatment of Buddhists in the Plum Village Community, during meetings both in the United States and in the country.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy officers engaged government officials following the destruction of the large concrete cross at Dong Chiem and the violence against Catholic parishioners. The ambassador and deputy chief of mission met numerous times with the archbishop of Hanoi, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Committee of Religious Affairs to advocate for a halt to mistreatment and peaceful resolution of the land dispute. Embassy officers also repeatedly met with Dong Chiem parishioners.

Representatives of the embassy and the consulate general had frequent contact with leaders of all major religious communities. The deputy chief of mission attended the Jubilee Celebration of 350 years of a Catholic Hierarchy in the country. Embassy and consulate general officers also met regularly with provincial representative boards of over 25 Protestant groups from a wide variety of theological backgrounds, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands. The embassy and consulate held several religious freedom roundtables during the reporting period to receive updates from both recognized Protestant churches and unrecognized house churches on the status of religious freedom.

In 2010 the embassy nominated three senior provincial CPV leaders and a central CRA official for a country-specific International Visitors Leadership Program to study religious freedom in the United States. In 2010 during the visit of the USNS Mercy hospital ship for a humanitarian mission to the country, the U.S. Navy coordinated activities with several faith-based charities and distributed wheelchairs provided by Latter-day Saint Charities.

Between 2005-10 USAID provided over \$7.6 million (VND 148 billion) in direct assistance to Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant organizations in the country in the following areas: Assisting orphans and at-risk children; adult and pediatric healthcare and support; medical assistance for

people living with HIV/AIDS, including home-based care; social reintegration and independent living programs for women and children; providing antiretroviral drugs for patients with AIDS; training Catholic and Protestant volunteers working with people living with HIV/AIDS; pagoda counseling and end of life care; and assisting adults and children with disabilities by focusing on social rehabilitation and vocational training.