



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Vietnam

Vietnam – Buddhists – Unified (or United)
Buddhist Church of Vietnam – Protests –
Quang Ngai Province – Lam Dong Province

2 February 2010

1 Please provide up-to-date information on the treatment of Buddhists generally in Vietnam.

Limited information was found regarding the treatment of Buddhists affiliated with the registered Vietnam Buddhist Church (VBC); however members and followers of unregistered Buddhist organisations such as the Unified (or United) Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) continued to experience harassment and discrimination by the Vietnamese authorities.

Some estimates indicate that more than half of Vietnam's population is at least nominally aligned with the prominent traditional position of Buddhism. The Vietnamese government requires that all religious groups are registered and operate under government-controlled organisations. Buddhist groups are required to be affiliated with the officially recognised and government-sponsored Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), or VBC, established in 1981, which incorporates all Mahayana, Theravada, and Bhikshu Buddhism. In addition, Buddhist monks are required to be approved by and work under VBC. However, not all Buddhists accepted the government's establishment of a single Buddhist organisation, particularly members and followers of the UBCV, which was formed in 1951. Due to the UBCV's resistance to incorporation in the VBC, it was banned by the Vietnamese government in 1981, and the government continues to deny its legitimacy. Peaceful demands for independence and greater religious freedom, such as that advocated by UBCV-affiliated Buddhists, are viewed as threats to the government's control and authority, and as a result, members and followers of such unregistered religious groups and churches are often threatened, forced to renounce their faith, harassed, or placed under house arrest.^{1 2 3 4 5}

However, the most recent US Department of State International Religious Freedom report for Vietnam identifies "[i]mprovements in respect for religious freedom" throughout 2008, with the government easing restrictions on most religious groups and increasing the number of nationally-recognised religions. It is noted in particular that "[m]any recognized and unrecognized religious groups...reported that the situation for their practitioners continued to improve overall".⁶

¹ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – Vietnam*, 26 October, Section I, Section II – Attachment 1

² Amnesty International 1994, 'Buddhist Monks in Detention', UNHCR Refworld website, 1 May <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher.AMNESTY.,VNM,3ae6a9a710,0.html> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 2

³ Human Rights Watch 2010, 'World Report 2010 – Vietnam', January, pp. 362-364 – Attachment 3

⁴ US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2007, 'Religious Freedom in Vietnam: Observations and Concerns After Recent USCIRF Trip to Vietnam', 6 December – Attachment 4

⁵ Amnesty International 2009, 'Amnesty International Report 2009 – Viet Nam', 28 May – Attachment 5

⁶ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – Vietnam*, 26 October, Section II – Attachment 1

2 Please provide any information on the treatment of Buddhists in Quang Ngai.

The most recent reference found among the sources consulted to Buddhists in Quang Ngai province relates to the house arrest of former UBCV leader Thich Huyen Quang. Quang was arrested in 1982 and forced into internal exile in Quang Ngai province “for publicly calling on the government to recognize the UBCV and for protesting violations of religious freedom and human rights”, where he remained until his death in 2008.⁷

In addition, a letter written by the International Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam to the Vatican in 2001 describes various incidents of oppression against Buddhists in Quang Ngai by the Vietnamese government, including the “[h]arassment of the Venerable Thich Quang Do during his trip to Quang Ngai in February 2001 to rescue flood victims”; and the prevention of three Buddhist delegations from travelling to Quang Ngai on 7 June 2001 to carry out an humanitarian mission, who “were finally forced to returned to Hue by countless of uniformed and plain clothed police on the national highway 1 toward Quang Ngai province”.⁸

3 Please provide any information on protests by Buddhists in Lam Dong Province and on the police response.

Lam Dong province in central Vietnam has been described in a 2008 news article as “a sensitive region where Vietnam’s ethnic and religious minorities regularly clash with officials”.⁹ A 1997 article on the Free Vietnam Alliance website, although dated, describes two incidents where Buddhists have protested in Lam Dong province. One of these incidents involved the resignation of leaders of the local VBC “in protest over [g]overnment interference in religious affairs”, following a government crackdown on Buddhists in the province. The second incident occurred on 9 July 1993 and involved a protest of 2,000 Buddhists, which was broken up by security police and army forces, and resulted in the arrest of “Thich Hanh Duc [a VBC leader and UBCV sympathiser] along with 25 novices and 100 Buddhist followers”.¹⁰

An article dated 8 June 2008 refers to a petition signed by 239 Buddhists protesting against the government’s treatment of UBCV-affiliated Thich Tri Khai, a Buddhist monk in Lam Dong province, who had been the subject of “a secret party document” signed by the Steering Committee on Religious Affairs in the district and the Assistant Secretary General of the Don-Duong Vietnamese Communist Party, which “urg[ed] citizens of his district to denounce him on moral grounds”.¹¹

Three recent incidents of VBC-affiliated mobs and riot police evicting Plum Village (Lang Mai) order-affiliated Buddhist monks and nuns from monasteries in Lam Dong province are outlined in a number of reports and news articles; however, an article in *The Guardian* dated 2

⁷ Human Rights Watch 2008, ‘Vietnam: Don’t Interfere in Buddhist Patriarch’s Funeral’, Human Rights Watch website, 9 July <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/07/07/vietnam-don-t-interfere-buddhist-patriarch-s-funeral> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 6

⁸ Le, N. H. 2001, ‘The International Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam send a letter to Vatican’, Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference website, 8 June <http://www.catholic.org.tw/vntaiwan/y2vietnam/toathah4.htm> - Accessed 2 February 2010 – Attachment 7

⁹ ‘Followers of Buddhist master allege harassment by Vietnamese regime’ 2009, *Taipei Times*, 8 August <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2009/08/08/2003450594> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 8

¹⁰ ‘State-sponsored Vietnam Buddhist Church Protests Against Government Interference in Religious Affairs’ 1997, Free Vietnam Alliance (FVA) website, 8 January <http://www.fva.org/0197/buddhist.htm> – Accessed 28 January 2010 – Attachment 9

¹¹ Denney, S. 2008, ‘Buddhist monk disappears, secret party document unveils plans’, Vietnam Human Rights Journal website, 8 June <http://vietnamlist.blogspot.com/2008/06/buddhist-monk-disappears-secret-party.html> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 10

October 2009 claims that “[t]he crackdown on their activities reportedly began about a year ago”.¹² A *BBC News* article dated 4 August 2009 claims that “[o]n 29 June, a group of vigilantes tried to evict the monks and nuns living at the Bat Nha monastery in Vietnam’s central highlands...Although nobody was seriously hurt, buildings were ransacked, personal belongings were taken and monks were threatened...Uniformed and plain clothes police were present too, but they reportedly did nothing to prevent the attack”.^{13 14}

In September 2009, approximately 380 monks and nuns were attacked and evicted from Bat Nha monastery in Lam Dong province.¹⁵ A Human Rights Watch article explains that “100 thugs and undercover police officers armed with sticks and hammers broke down the doors and forcefully evicted 150 monks...beating some of the monks in the process. Police reportedly arrested two senior monks, Phap Hoi and Phap Sy, whose whereabouts remain unknown. The next day, in response to threats and coercion, more than 200 Buddhist nuns...fled the monastery, seeking temporary refuge with the monks at a nearby pagoda”.¹⁶

In December 2009, a mob of approximately 100 to 200 people, “allegedly directed by undercover police and communist party officials” assaulted and attempted to evict the same 380 monks and nuns from Phuoc Hue monastery in Lam Dong province, where they had fled for shelter following the first eviction from Bat Nha. According to observers, the crowd “had been mobilized by government officials for three days’ work, at 200,000 dong (US \$11) a day”. Police reportedly took no action against those involved in the attacks, with one report from Human Rights Watch suggesting that the Vietnamese authorities actively participated in the attacks, noting in particular the presence of [t]he provincial head of a special police unit within the Ministry of Public Security called A41...[o]ften called the “religious police,” [which] monitors groups the government considers to be religious “extremists” throughout Vietnam”. Amnesty International similarly outlined the active involvement of the Vietnamese authorities in the mob’s actions, claiming that “they have ordered members of Communist Party organisations to take action against the monks and nuns; pressured members of the monks and nuns’ families to give up their way of life; and occasionally blocking supplies of food and other essentials to the monastery”.^{17 18 19}

¹² McCurry, J. 2009, ‘Vietnamese riot police target Buddhist monk’s followers’, *The Guardian*, 2 October <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/02/vietnam-police-buddhist-monks-nuns> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 11

¹³ ‘Attack on a Vietnam monastery’ 2009, *BBC News*, 4 August <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8168200.stm> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 12

¹⁴ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – Vietnam*, 26 October, Introduction, Section II – Attachment 1

¹⁵ Amnesty International 2009, ‘Urgent Action: Monks and Nuns Threatened with Eviction’, Amnesty International website, 23 December <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA41/013/2009/en/d6dea660-439a-4c8d-9b05-026e4c4caf49/asa410132009en.pdf> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 13

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch 2009, ‘Vietnam: Sharp Backsliding on Religious Freedom’, Human Rights Watch website, 18 October <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/18/vietnam-sharp-backsliding-religious-freedom> – Accessed 24 November 2009 – Attachment 14

¹⁷ Amnesty International 2009, ‘Urgent Action: Monks and Nuns Threatened with Eviction’, Amnesty International website, 23 December <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA41/013/2009/en/d6dea660-439a-4c8d-9b05-026e4c4caf49/asa410132009en.pdf> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 13

¹⁸ McCurry, J. 2009, ‘Vietnamese Buddhists seek asylum in France’, *The Guardian*, 17 December <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/17/vietnamese-buddhists-seek-asylum-france> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 15

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch 2009, ‘Vietnam: End Attacks on Bat Nha Buddhists’, Human Rights watch website, 16 December <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/12/16/vietnam-end-attacks-bat-nha-buddhists> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 16

4 Are there any reports of the Vietnamese authorities cutting water or power supplies to Buddhist communities or monasteries?

A Human Rights Watch article explains that the forced expulsions of Buddhist monks and nuns from Bat Nha monastery in September 2009, outlined in response to question 3 above, occurred after “water, electricity, and telephone lines were shut off [in June 2009] in an effort to force the monks and nuns to leave”.²⁰ The *BBC News* article dated 4 August 2009 cited in response to question 3 also states that “[t]he attack [on Bat Nha monastery on 29 June 2009] left monks without food for two weeks and there is still no electricity or water at the monastery”.²¹ A news article dated 8 August 2009 claims that “[a]s of yesterday morning, two of three areas at Bat Nha...still had no electricity or water”.²²

The *Guardian* news article referred to in response to question 1 explains that “the authorities [also] cut off the monastery’s power supply” during the eviction in September 2009;²³ while a Human Rights Watch article claims that “[s]ince the September eviction at Bat Nha, authorities have relentlessly harassed and pressured the Bat Nha Buddhists to vacate Phuoc Hue and other pagodas that took them in, periodically cutting electricity and water and barring local lay people from providing food and supplies”.²⁴ The US Department of State International Religious Freedom report released in 2009 claims that “as of the end of the reporting period the Plum Village order remained without power and water”.²⁵

In addition, the International Federation for Human Rights 2009 report on Vietnam describes the decades-long detention under house arrest of Thich Huyen Quang, the former Patriarch of the UBCV, during which his telephone line was disconnected.²⁶

5 Please provide information on the UBCV, its structure, activities and office holders.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) was established in 1951, combining 11 Buddhist sects and claiming the support of the majority of Vietnamese people. The group currently represents over 75 percent of Vietnamese Buddhists. The UBCV has long been a prominent human rights advocate, taking part in the anti-war movement of the 1960s and campaigning for religious freedom. Despite disagreements among its leadership over how best to promote social change, the UBCV established a number of social institutions, including schools, Buddhist hospitals and orphanages. The group was banned by the Vietnamese government in 1981 after resisting attempts by the government to integrate it into

²⁰ Human Rights Watch 2009, ‘Vietnam: Sharp Backsliding on Religious Freedom’, Human Rights Watch website, 18 October <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/18/vietnam-sharp-backsliding-religious-freedom> – Accessed 24 November 2009 – Attachment 14

²¹ ‘Attack on a Vietnam monastery’ 2009, *BBC News*, 4 August <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8168200.stm> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 12

²² ‘Followers of Buddhist master allege harassment by Vietnamese regime’ 2009, *Taipei Times*, 8 August <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2009/08/08/2003450594> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 8

²³ McCurry, J. 2009, ‘Vietnamese riot police target Buddhist monk’s followers’, *The Guardian*, 2 October <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/02/vietnam-police-buddhist-monks-nuns> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 11

²⁴ Human Rights Watch 2009, ‘Vietnam: End Attacks on Bat Nha Buddhists’, Human Rights watch website, 16 December <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/12/16/vietnam-end-attacks-bat-nha-buddhists> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 16

²⁵ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – Vietnam*, 26 October, Introduction, Section II – Attachment 1

²⁶ International Federation for Human Rights 2009, ‘Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders Annual Report 2009: Vietnam’, 18 June – Attachment 17

the newly-established Vietnam Buddhist Church, the sole Buddhist organisation to be recognised by the Vietnamese authorities. Since the government requires that all religious groups are registered and operate under government-controlled organisations, the UBCV is not recognised as legitimate by the Vietnamese government and therefore its members face restrictions on openly practicing their faith.^{27 28 29 30} A 2006 fact sheet on religion in Vietnam explains that the Vietnamese government has not registered the UBCV due to “the fiercely anti-government views of its leadership”.³¹

Members and followers of the UBCV have continually asserted their right to belong to an independent religious group, and have denounced the ban placed on the group by the authorities. Buddhist monks and leaders of the UBCV, Thich Huyen Quang (now deceased) and Thich Quang Do, who were both arrested in the late 1970s and subsequently placed under house arrest in 1982, have “criticized the authorities over alleged persecution, human rights violations, and state control over Buddhist institutions”; while the Vietnamese government has accused the UBCV of “using religion to engage in political activities”.^{32 33}

Thich Huyen Quang, who helped to found the UBCV, was recognised as Patriarch of the UBCV in 1992 following the death of then-UBCV leader Thich Don Hau. It has been argued that “the death of Thich Don Hau marked the beginning of renewed activism to reestablish the Unified Buddhist Church” which had been somewhat quiet in the previous decade, “during which time the government severely restricted the operations of churches, pagodas, and religious communities throughout the country”. As Patriarch of the UBCV, Thich Huyen Quang continually suffered harassment and internal exile until his death whilst still under house arrest in July 2008. Following his death, deputy leader Thich Quang Do, also currently under house arrest, took over as Patriarch of the UBCV.^{34 35 36}

6 Please provide information on the authorities’ treatment of members of the UBCV.

The UBCV’s actions in seeking independent status, advocating for increased government respect for human rights and protesting against government interference in religious affairs, has resulted in many years of harassment and repression, including the arrest, detention, imprisonment and imposition of travel restrictions on many UBCV leaders.³⁷ The most recent

²⁷ Blomfield, S. 2008, ‘Thich Huyen Quang’, *The Guardian*, 3 September

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/03/buddhism> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 18

²⁸ International Federation for Human Rights 2009, ‘Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders Annual Report 2009: Vietnam’, 18 June – Attachment 17

²⁹ Amnesty International 1994, ‘Buddhist Monks in Detention’, UNHCR Refworld website, 1 May <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher.AMNESTY.,VNM,3ae6a9a710,0.html> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 2

³⁰ Human Rights Watch 1995, ‘Vietnam: The Suppression of the Unified Buddhist Church’, Human Rights Watch website, March, Vol. 7, No. 4 <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1995/Vietnam.htm> – Accessed 2 February 2010 – Attachment 19

³¹ US Department of State 2006, ‘Vietnam: Fact Sheet – Religion and Trafficking in Persons’, 17 July – Attachment 20

³² Amnesty International 1994, ‘Buddhist Monks in Detention’, UNHCR Refworld website, 1 May <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher.AMNESTY.,VNM,3ae6a9a710,0.html> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 2

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³⁴ ‘Dissident patriarch of Vietnam Buddhist group dies’ 2008, *Reuters*, 6 July <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSBK10120020080706> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 21

³⁵ Blomfield, S. 2008, ‘Thich Huyen Quang’, *The Guardian*, 3 September <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/03/buddhism> – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 18

³⁶ Amnesty International 2009, ‘Amnesty International Report 2009 – Viet Nam’, 28 May – Attachment 5

³⁷ Human Rights Watch 2009, ‘Vietnam: Sharp Backsliding on Religious Freedom’, Human Rights Watch website, 18 October

US Department of State International Religious Freedom report for Vietnam indicates that the movements of UBCV leaders were restricted and their actions continued to be monitored closely by the government. Participation in the activities of unrecognised religious groups such as the UBCV was restricted and discouraged, and efforts by the UBCV to undertake charitable activities were opposed by the government, however, the UBCV was able to operate a number of pagodas without restriction.³⁸ The International Federation for Human Rights annual report for 2009 similarly claims that the government restricted the freedom of expression of unregistered religious leaders who advocated for legal and political reform and as such, were viewed as “attempting to destabilise the Government and [therefore] a threat to national security”. The report explains that UBCV members in particular have been targeted for repression and discrimination by the government, involving “harassment by the police, evictions from pagodas, surveillance, threats, interrogations, disappearances, arrests and detentions – including house arrest”.³⁹

The Vietnamese authorities have repeatedly attempted to restrict celebrations and funeral services organised by the UBCV, including the funeral services for former UBCV leader Thich Huyen Quang on 11 July 2008, which the government initially announced would be organised by the state-sanctioned VBC. However, despite being under house arrest, Buddhist monk and new leader of the UBCV, Thich Quang Do, was able to lead former UBCV leader Quang’s funeral service after international pressure forced authorities to permit the event to go ahead. The authorities, however, had earlier described UBCV followers as “extremist elements disguised as Buddhist monks”.^{40 41} Additionally, members of the UBCV were banned from celebrating the Buddhist Day of Vesak (or Visak), the Anniversary of the Birth of Buddha, in 2007 and 2008. A Vesak Message by former UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang was prohibited from circulation, while Buddhists in various parts of the country reported being “harassed and threatened by Security Police and prohibited from organizing Vesak ceremonies”. In Lam Dong province, government officials attempted to evict UBCV monk Thich Tri Khai from his pagoda in April “in order to control it during the Visak celebrations”; while head of the local UBCV Board, Venerable Thich Nhu Tan, was similarly “threatened with expulsion from his Pagoda if he persists in plans to celebrate the Vesak”.⁴²
43 44

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³⁸ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – Vietnam*, 26 October, Introduction, Section II – Attachment 1

³⁹ International Federation for Human Rights 2009, ‘Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders Annual Report 2009: Vietnam’, 18 June – Attachment 17

⁴⁰ ‘Vietnam dissident Buddhist church appoints new leader’ 2008, *Agence France Presse*, 17 August – Attachment 22

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch 2008, ‘Vietnam: Don’t Interfere in Buddhist Patriarch’s Funeral’, Human Rights Watch website, 9 July <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/07/07/vietnam-don-t-interfere-buddhist-patriarch-s-funeral> - Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 6

⁴² Human Rights Watch 2008, ‘Religious freedom denied’, 8 May – Attachment 23

⁴³ ‘Vietnam bans UBCV Buddhists in Hue, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Ba Ria Vung Tau, Tien Giang, Lam Dong from celebrating Buddha’s Birth – Thich Thien Hanh prepares to hold ceremony in Hue despite government ban’ 2007, Que Me website, source: International Buddhist information Bureau, 30 May

http://www.que.me.net/eng/news_detail.php?numb=808 – Accessed 29 January 2010 – Attachment 24

⁴⁴ International Federation for Human Rights 2009, ‘Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders Annual Report 2009: Vietnam’, 18 June – Attachment 17

UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/>

Non-Government Organisations

Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

International Crisis Group <http://www.crisisgroup.org/>

Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org/>

Freedom House <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>

United Nations

UNHCR Refworld <http://www.refworld.org/>

International News & Politics

The Economist <http://www.economist.com/>

The Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

Reuters <http://www.reuters.com/>

BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

ABC News <http://www.abc.net.au/>

Region Specific Links

Vietnam Human Rights Journal <http://vietnamlist.blogspot.com/>

Que Me <http://www.que.me.net/>

Search Engines

Google <http://www.google.com.au/>

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Research & Information database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

MRT-RRT Library Catalogue

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