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Vietnam: A report on the religious liberty reality

By Elizabeth Kendal

The following deeply disturbing report on Vietnam was written by an internationally respected Vietnam observer. The observer reports that there are many hundreds of unregistered Christian meeting places and gatherings in Vietnam where believers meet at great personal risk to their liberty and life, despite the Vietnamese government's boasts of freedom of religion.

The observer also reports that nearly 300 Christian leaders have been incarcerated since the April 2004 Easter demonstrations, and that at least 60 Protestant leaders languish in the infamous Ba Sao Prison in Nam Ha Province on long prison sentences.

Reliable, trusted sources told the observer that the Vietnamese government is recruiting and training special units from amongst the Hmong and Montagnards to combat the spread of Christianity (described as an internal enemy) in their ethnic communities.

This report also examines the appalling and violent mistreatment meted out to the Mennonite prisoners, and the distressing state of the one female Mennonite prisoner arrested in June 2004, Le Thi Hong Lien (21), who has become deranged with trauma.

Totalitarian states require friendly international relations in order to pursue coveted economic development. However, the more the totalitarian governments open up economically and diplomatically, the more they need to repress their suffering masses, restricting their access to information and cracking down on all dissent and perceived threats in order to hold on to power. They also need to ensure that their propaganda speaks louder and is more convincing (or appealing) than the truth. It becomes a perpetual game of testing the waters (how much can we get away with?) and should be matched by a testing of the "bones" (not accepting everything at face value) as the confronting report below suggests.

The question then becomes: How much duplicity will the Vietnamese government be permitted? Those who knowingly accept and wink at the government of Vietnam's duplicity are complicit in the government of Vietnam's morally reprehensible human rights abuses.

A BOX OF MIXED BONES

Religious human rights in Vietnam
by a Vietnam observer,

In early December 2004, North Korea infuriated Japan by trying to pass off "a box of mixed human bones" as the remains of a woman it had kidnapped from Japan when she was 13. After DNA testing, a Japanese cabinet secretary announced on December 8 that, "The bones belong to a number of other people. It would be difficult under the present circumstances to provide further assistance to North Korea." The announcement caused shock waves in Japan, a nation that venerates its dead.

This is an apt metaphor for what Vietnam is trying to do with its human rights—religious freedom policies. It is giving the world "a box of mixed bones". But unlike Japan's incensed people, many in the world seem to be accepting them as the genuine article. The guile of trying to pass off the counterfeit is surpassed only by the naivete of accepting it as real.

Concerned about its reputation in the region and the world, with WTO prospects, and stung by continued revelations of religious human rights abuses, Vietnam is in the midst of an unprecedented propaganda campaign to show the world all is well.

Here, however, are some examples of Vietnam's ongoing restrictive and abusive practices.

THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS AND THE NORTHWEST PROVINCES

An area of continued great concern to which Vietnamese authorities deny free access is the Central Highlands. A propa

ganda piece sent on 4 November 2004 by ambassador Phan Thuy Thanh from the Vietnamese Embassy in Brussels, to inquirers in Holland, is full of disingenuous "information". It entirely denies that land and religion have anything to do with the unrest. It says:

"Vietnam's law ensures the right to freedom of religion and belief and non-religion or belief to all citizens, which is clearly inscribed in the constitution and respected in reality. There is absolutely no question of the so-called 'repression of Protestants'. On the contrary, Protestants in the Central Highlands enjoy favourable conditions for religious practices. There are about 25 grass root Protestant groups in the Central Highland."

Here is the "reality". There are in the five Highland provinces with minorities - Dak Nong, Lam Dong, Dak Lak, Gai Lai and part of Binh Phuoc - at least 1,700 Protestant "meeting places" where Christians gather to worship. The government recognizes about 25, but cannot even bring itself to call them churches, because it has not allowed them to build church buildings!

Beginning in September 2002 a massive government campaign forcibly disbanded many hundreds of local churches and other campaigns sought to force Christians to renounce their faith. Nearly 300 Christians leaders are known to have been arrested and are incarcerated, some still without trial since the April 2004 Easter demonstrations. At least 60 Protestant leaders, including eight regular pastors of local churches, languish in the infamous Ba Sao Prison in Nam Ha Province, all with long prison sentences. After the demonstrations last Easter, authorities promised only a handful of "ringleaders" would be tried and sentenced. Another promise broken.

In Dak Lak, a province that remains virtually locked down to regular travel for residents and visitors alike, the state recognizes only two ethnic Vietnamese and two Ede minority churches that meet in the homes of the pastors. Christian leaders report there are 439 meeting places in the province. Four out of 439 is less than one per cent! The pastors of the four groups, supposedly recognized by the state, are not even free to visit their own parishioners without getting complicated permissions. Christian leaders in the province say the vast majority of the approximately 150,000 Protestant Christians must now practice their faith underground - and so worship, teaching, baptisms and the observance of holy communion must be done out of sight of the authorities. Protestant leaders say the government plan to "eradicate" Christianity, frequently enunciated by hardline local officials, continues gradually but steadily. All villages and hamlets have constant military and/or police presence.

Similar stories are told about the other provinces. In Gia Lai province where strong church leaders do daily battle with the authorities, some 16 church groups have now been recognized. But there are 400 meeting places! One prominent church leader of the Jeraï minority who was described in a "complimentary manner" in a communist journal has accused authorities of fabricating much of the story and has demanded a public retraction. Compliments by the Party or State for a religious leader are a curse to be overcome because they cause his followers to suspect his integrity.

ETHNIC SPECIAL UNITS TO COMBAT THE INTERNAL ENEMY

In a very troubling development not yet reported elsewhere, it has been learned from independent sources which have proved reliable in the past, that the Vietnamese government is in the process of recruiting and training both Hmong in the Northwest Provinces and Montagnards in the Central Highlands for special units to oppose the spread and development of Christianity.

The purpose of the unit according to the Hmong sources is to "oppose an enemy, not external, but internal". That is Christianity. Men are being recruited on a basis of loyalty to the repressive system and the absence of sympathies for Christian believers. They are being given training after which they will return to their home areas to suppress Christianity. Some of those being recruited are former military people. (At least a dozen Hmong Christian leaders remain in prison in the Northwest provinces.)

And similarly, a knowledgeable Dak Lak Montagnard source has reported that authorities are recruiting training a special unit of 2,500 Montagnards for similar purposes.

Such an approach is intended to give the government plausible deniability as they will make it look as if there is spontaneous indigenous ethnic resistance to a "foreign religion". This action underlines that religious freedom for minorities is NOT in the government's plan - all protestations to the contrary. It takes delusional mental gymnastics to see "progress" in freedom for minority Christians in this picture.

DEVELOPMENTS CONCERNING THE NEW ORDINANCE ON RELIGION

Announced to become effective on 15 November 2004, the new ordinance has not provided signs of hope to religious people. Authorities, who believed they were making concessions in the new religion ordinance were surprised by the depth of opposition which included complaints from some religious groups they believed were safely "patriotic".

It has been learned that before being fully implemented, the new Ordinance is to be further spelled out by a new decree, implementation bulletins, and forms for the many permissions required. Authorities are currently stuck at the decree level. Draft three of the decree is circulating among religious groups but authorities are said to be on draft five.

The new ordinance and draft decree still provide no legal space for house churches, nor for the majority of Protestant Evangelical Christians in Vietnam who are ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and the Northwest Provinces. Therefore some 75 percent of Protestants in Vietnam continue to be excluded from legality in spite of Vietnam's pronouncements about liberalization in the emerging legal framework. In anticipation of the ordinance coming into effect, some house churches, fearing the worst, have already divided into smaller, less visible groups.

The 1999 Government Decree on Religion No. 26 continues to be used a legal tool to suppress religious activity. On 11 November 2004, the People's Committee of Dong Xuan District in Phu Yen Province responded in a letter to a request from a small Protestant congregation to register its activities. The congregation of Da Du Hamlet, Xuan Lanh Commune, had functioned there for some years with the knowledge of the authorities and with few difficulties. So it accepted in good faith the government's well-advertised new liberalization in religious affairs and tried to register its activities.

The result was entirely disheartening. The congregation ended up in a much worse situation than when it operated informally earlier. The Dong Xuan District People's Committee flatly denied the congregation permission to meet and practice their faith on the basis of Decree 26. The directive to the congregation concluded ominously: "The People's Committee of Dong Xuan District orders the People's Committee of Xuan Lanh Commune to coordinate with the Fatherland Front and other government organs in the commune to mobilize, educate and abruptly halt and take legal measures against all meetings, religious activities and propagation activities of a number of people in Da Du Hamlet of Xuan Lanh Commune."

Such is the reward of a small Protestant congregation that dares test the government's announced intention to liberalize restrictions on religion. It is difficult to see any progress in the area of creating new laws, and implementing current ones.

PERSECUTION OF THE VIETNAMESE MENNONITE CHURCH

The well-publicized conviction and sentencing of six Vietnamese Mennonites on 12 November 2004, on a "criminal charge" seems to be considered by some as difficult to oppose because it involved a "criminal charge". Strangely, some diplomats and even some Mennonite groups seem to accept and be immobilized by the government's consistent claim that "it has nothing to do with religion".

That this view is simply wrong is shown by the fact that from 10 November to 3 December 2004 the home/church of the Rev. Nguyen Hong Quang, cared for by his 30-year-old wife Le Thi Phu Dung, was invaded five times by gangs of uniformed and plain-clothes police, up to 40 at a time and sometime at midnight. This round of persecution began with a cultural revolution-style public accusation/humiliation session against Mrs. Quang. A recording of this session makes clear it is against the "illegal Christian religion". Authorities require Mrs. Quang to cease all religious gatherings, activities and ceremonies in the Quang house/church, and to take down the church sign. Videos of some of the police raids have also made their way to the West.

With the release of two of the six prisoners in early December, written testimonies of their unbelievable mistreatment while in custody became available. These reports in translation are available. Readers will agree that the treatment of the two brothers, Nhan and Nghia, is worthy of the Soviet Gulags. A 5 January 2005 press release of the Mennonite World Conference details some of the awful abuse.

Even more horrible is the complete crushing of the body, mind and spirit of the lone woman among the six prisoners, 21-year-old Le Thi Hong Lien. Physical and mental abuse by officials has caused Ms Lien to lose her mind and control over bodily functions. The poignant report and reflections of her poor, day-labourer father, written after his visit with her on 14 December, with additional information gleaned from previous prison visits, is also available. Her father has been denied any access to her since. On 7 January 2005, Amnesty International issued an urgent appeal on her behalf.

Government policy makers, business people and aid organizations wishing to do business with and help the people of Vietnam need to keep these realities firmly in mind when dealing with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. They should test a few bones. Without clear international consequences for its gross misbehaviour toward its own peaceful citizens, Vietnam will have no incentive to change.

Vietnam Observer

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