

# Briefing

## Vietnam

### Religious Freedom for Protestant Christians

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**Christian Solidarity Worldwide**  
**Voice for the Voiceless**

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## **I Recommendations**

As Vietnam looks to augment its position in the international community, CSW urges that the Vietnamese government be held accountable to its religious freedom obligations under international law, and encouraged to ensure clear improvements in the situation of religious freedom across the country, especially in those provinces in which the worst violations occur.

In particular, CSW recommends that the government of Vietnam is strongly encouraged:

- To clarify the ambiguities and loopholes concerning the process of official registration, and to ensure that competent authorities are obliged to facilitate the process;
- To ensure that, from a national to a village level, Party and security officials are educated and held accountable to the new provisions on religious activity, as stipulated in Article 7(2) of the Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organisations;
- To ensure the equal implementation of the provisions on religious activity;
- To fully investigate any allegations against local authorities, especially those pertaining to beatings, attempts at forcing renunciations of faith or any other measures to obstruct religious leaders from registering their congregations;
- To fully investigate any allegations of religious conditions being attached by local authorities to the receipt of funding or other benefits, as such cases arise;
- To proactively uphold the right to peaceful assembly for religious organisations, including Protestant Christians, as guaranteed in Article 21 of the ICCPR.

## **2 Executive Summary**

The overall situation of religious freedom in Vietnam must be considered in the context of the recent measures introduced to regulate religious activities. However, the most significant indicator of the religious freedom situation is the experience of religious adherents across the country. This report arises from the experiences recounted by a sample of Protestant Christians from a variety of ethnic groups and provinces.

The Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organisations, coupled with Decree 22 of March 2005, have established some form of legal framework for religious activities in the country. However, not only does the fact of central administrative control over religious activities give cause for concern of itself, the efficacy of this framework is severely limited by a number of factors. These include the existence of a number of ambiguities, tensions and overlapping provisions which occur within and between the two documents, and the considerable unevenness of its implementation across the country. Persistent reports from Protestant leaders across the country of having been informed by authorities that the new measures simply do not apply to them, are especially damning in this regard. In particular, they undermine the confidence of church leaders in the seriousness with which the government of Vietnam takes the issue of religious freedom.

In the final analysis, the reality of religious freedom in Vietnam must be judged according to the actual experiences of religious leaders and adherents; indeed, it is including the provinces in which the most severe violations occur by which progress must be measured. In light of the arbitrary actions and policies of provincial- to village-level authorities, the Christian community of Vietnam has called upon the government to ensure adherence to the rule of law and respect for the rights of all Vietnamese citizens in the area of religious freedom, in accordance with Vietnam's obligations under international law.

The intention to encourage the implementation of the state's policies on religion and to submit to international standards has been articulated in Articles 7(2) and 38 of the Ordinance, respectively.

There is need both to ensure that state policies are in accordance with international standards, and to ensure their effective and uniform implementation at a local level.

Within the Protestant Christian community, whose situation is the focus of this report, the most severe repression of religious activity is experienced by those belonging to the ethnic minority groups. Among these groups, the largest Christian population exists among the Hmong people, who inhabit some of the areas in northern Vietnam in which religious freedom is most severely restricted. Their situation is therefore a particularly important test-case of religious freedom in Vietnam. The Hmong population of Vietnam totals an estimated 600,000, among whom as many as half profess Christian faith. The officially-registered Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) has extended recognition to over 1000 Hmong congregations, though authorities from the local to provincial levels have continued to block the registration of such congregations. In many cases, the persecution experienced by Hmong Protestant communities intensified after an attempt was made by a Christian leader to officially register the church. Hmong church leaders have also reported being informed by the authorities that the government's provisions for official registration do not apply to them. These commonplace experiences appear to indicate a continued lack of commitment to improving religious freedom in the north.

It should be noted that persecution is by no means exclusively experienced by Hmong Christians. The second largest Christian population exists among the Yao people, to whom many of the same concerns are applicable. In the south, severe repression of religious activities has been experienced by Christians among other ethnic minorities, including notably the Sedang, Hre and E-de in Dak Lak Province. Additionally, some Christians of Vietnamese (Kinh) ethnicity have reported being prevented from joining ethnic minority congregations.

The persecution experienced by Christians often stems from the arbitrary approaches taken by officials at a variety of levels with regard to religious activity. While much of the harassment of village Christians is instigated by village-level authorities, this is often supported from a district or provincial level; for example, some Christians have experienced security officials from a higher level being brought into villages to follow up threats issued by village authorities. In the experience of others, external police have been posted in villages to control religious activities. A Protestant leader in Quang Ngai recently reported being informed by district police that he would not be protected from any violence perpetrated by village authorities. There has also emerged from testimonies of Hmong Protestant leaders a consistent theme implicating border police in obstructing Christians from meeting together, and in issuing threats and violence against individual Christians. In some cases, the authority of border security officials is used to back up, and therefore legitimate, the authority of local officials in preventing Christians from manifesting their faith. The border police are highly feared among the Christian community in northern Vietnam, and are renowned for their arbitrary behaviour and tight control in border villages. Their activities, and those of other officials in repressing Protestant activities, indicate a considerable weakness in the rule of law in some areas of Vietnam.

The main forms of persecution experienced by ethnic minority church leaders include attempts at forcible renunciations of faith and the prevention of Christians from gathering to worship, as well as beatings, interrogations and threats.

### **3 Context: Social & Political Antagonism to Protestant Christianity**

This report is focused on the level of religious freedom experienced by adherents to Protestant Christianity in Vietnam. It is worth noting that in general, the degree of control and repression experienced by Protestants is considerably more acute within rural villages than in major cities, where a greater number of churches are allowed to operate more freely.

The persecution of Protestant churches in rural areas is seen by some Christian leaders as being the result of two major factors. Firstly, religious affiliation undermines the authority of leading figures in the village, including 'witch-doctors' and village heads. These figures lose the material benefits which they gain through sacrifices offered by the villagers, and they lose authority when Christians turn to local deacons for leadership. The homogeneity of the village community, which is highly valued in Vietnam, is also seen to be undermined.

The second important root of the persecution is the political concern generated by Christian affiliation. Profession of Christian faith is widely perceived in terms of an allegiance to an international body, and the political consequences of this are feared. Christianity is often viewed as a dangerous foreign religion; the interrogations faced by Than Van Truong, who was formerly detained in a mental hospital in connection with his religious activities, clearly exemplify this perception. In a confused sequence of accusations, Truong was slandered for belonging to the religion of the American President, and that of Osama Bin Laden. The inference to the objectionable nature of Christian faith is clear.

An acute fear of separatism exists with respect to the Hmong ethnic group, which has long been perceived by Vietnamese Communists as a political threat, and associated with the USA. Since the late 1980s, the number of Protestant Christians among the Hmong may have grown to as many as 250-300,000,<sup>1</sup> more than among any other ethnic minority group. This development may have intensified the perception that the Christian religion poses a political threat.

A linguistic complication exacerbates this political fear of the Christian religion. It relates to the Hmong term, 'Vang Chu', which is used to denote 'God' or a 'Christian'. However, the term is also used of a king or overlord, and may therefore be interpreted, or misinterpreted, as suggestive of political ambitions among Hmong Christians. Nonetheless, Hmong Protestant leaders have repeatedly stressed that no such ambitions are entailed by adherence to the Christian faith. Any attempts at establishing connections with Hmong Christians outside Vietnam are motivated chiefly by a shared religious affiliation.

The 'Dega' movement in the central highlands, with its more overt political ambitions, creates a level of complexity in determining the nature of official antagonism to Christianity, given the existence of some overlap with the Protestant movement. Reportedly, local authorities often fail to make the necessary distinction between the Dega and Protestant movements, with the result that ordinary Protestants may face restrictions designed to limit Dega activity. The gathering of Christians in this area is therefore subject to particular restrictions.

The allegations made during the breaking up of church meetings betray a political fear of such gatherings. For example, a Protestant leader from Khanh Hoa Province recently reported that he was accused by police of leading a rebellion. The intensified restrictions experienced by many churches during the Christmas period of 2005, may also reflect the political aspect of the antagonism towards Protestant Christianity. Two Protestant leaders known to CSW from Lao Cai Province described an intensified police presence in their villages around Christmas, which resulted in restrictions on church activities. Both faced threats of imprisonment if they should assemble Christians together. Another leader, from Quang Ngai Province, reported that permission to gather was only granted to his church for a specified period before Christmas. According to CSW sources, barely any churches among the Hre ethnic minority group in Dak Lak were permitted to gather during this period. This evidence suggests that a particular threat was perceived in the gathering of churches during a major Christian festival.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is an estimate from sources working among the Hmong people; no accurate figures exist.

## **4 Legal Status of Protestant Christianity**

### **4.1 Religious Freedom Obligations under International Law**

Vietnam is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 18, which closely mirrors the same article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provides that, 'Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching'.

Article 21 protects the right of 'peaceful assembly', while discrimination based on religion is proscribed and effective protection against discrimination guaranteed in Article 26. Article 27 protects the freedom of ethnic minorities to practise their own religion.

Additionally, Vietnam has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 2 specifies that a state must take measures to ensure that a child faces no discrimination on the basis of beliefs held by his/her parents. Article 14 guarantees the right of a child to 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion', and freedom to manifest religious beliefs. Article 17 requires that a child have access to resources aimed at promoting his/her spiritual well-being; Article 27 provides for a standard of living adequate to a child's spiritual development, and Article 30 for a child belonging to an ethnic minority to profess and practise a religion.

### **4.2 Domestic Legislative Framework**

The legal framework for the religious activities of individuals and organisations in Vietnam is defined in two documents introduced since late 2004, which superseded all previous provisions. The Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organisations (21/2004/PL-UBTVQH11) came into effect on 15 November 2004, and was complemented by the Decree on Religion (22/2005/ND-CP), entitled 'Guidelines for implementing some parts of the Ordinance on Religion', which was promulgated on 1 March 2005.

In addition, on 4 February 2005, the Prime Minister issued a document of lesser legal status, entitled, 'Special Instructions Concerning the Protestant Religion' (01/2005/CT-TTg). When introduced, this document was thought to contain some promise for real progress in religious freedom for Protestants in Vietnam. It explicitly prohibited the forced renunciation of Christian faith, and enjoined local authorities to create favourable conditions for Protestantism. It also provided for Christian congregations to obtain official permission from local authorities to carry out religious activities, even when the larger church organisations to which they belong have not yet acquired legal recognition from the state. Furthermore, the Instructions opened the way for the registration of Protestant bodies that had been active since 1975, and pledged to 'continue to register' churches in the central highlands. Making specific mention of the Protestant movement among the ethnic minorities in the north-west of the country, the document promised registration for these groups, but only 'if real religious need is demonstrated'.

### **4.3 Ambiguities & Difficulties**

The Ordinance and Decree, which carry a higher legal status than the Instructions and therefore take priority over its more generous provisions, contain a number of ambiguities and difficulties which limit their potential to improve the religious freedom situation in Vietnam. Among the central concerns are the conditionality they set on the exercise of fundamental rights, their lack of precision and clarity (particularly in describing the process for official registration), and the effective exclusion of many ethnic minority Protestant churches from eligibility for official recognition.

The Ordinance has been criticised for the limited scope of the freedoms it offers to religious organisations, because many prior rights are applicable only once permission has been granted for their exercise. Article 1 affirms the protection of religious freedom by the state, while many of the subsequent articles qualify or offer substantial limitations to these general rights. Most importantly, Article 19(1) states that religious congregations may operate only after being registered with the competent authority. The Ordinance was originally greeted by strong protests from some religious leaders, on the grounds that it provided no more than the freedom to ask permission for a myriad of religious matters, while little obligation was laid on the state to respond to these requests. Religious groups feared that it provides a more substantial legal basis for the limiting of religious liberties in Vietnam.

This problem is compounded by the ill-defined terminology used in the limitations imposed on religious organisations. Among the conditions for registration contained in Article 16 of the Ordinance, the tenets and rites of a religious organisation must not 'go against the nation's fine traditions and customs, and the common benefit of the people'. Similarly, Article 15(2) stipulates that '[r]eligious beliefs and religion activities will be suspended' if '[t]hey negatively affect the unity of the people of the nation's fine cultural traditions'. This phraseology might easily admit a wide range of interpretations, and has little usefulness in legal definitions. An organisation must also maintain 'stable operations', according to Article 16 of the Ordinance and Article 8(2)(e) of the Decree; this is another term with no clear meaning in law.

There also exists a number of ambiguities and tensions between the Ordinance and the Decree, which appear to create conditions in which harassment of Christian groups may continue to take place. Some commentators on Vietnam have suggested that the contradictions between the various documents provide legal justification for a variety of methods of dealing with religious groups.

This lack of clarity and consistency is particularly evident in the requirements imposed on religious groups to register their activities and subsequently to seek legal recognition as religious organisations. For example, a loophole exists whereby the competent authorities are not obliged to facilitate the registration of Protestant churches. The Ordinance and the Decree both identify the government Bureau of Religious Affairs and its regional offices as the competent registration authorities; however, Article 7 of the Instructions requires local officials to 'carefully examine to see if there is really a need for religious belief' before assisting the process of registration. Furthermore, the process for registration is itself unclear from the stipulations of the Ordinance and Decree. For example, Article 6(2)(a) of the Decree requires that a religious organisation must specify its 'number of believers' in its application to register. This is discordant with the definitions given in the Article 3 of the Ordinance: clause (8) defines a 'believer' as 'a person who believes in a religion and is acknowledged as a believer by that religion', while clause (3) defines a religious organisation as 'an assembly of believers ... [with] a clear organisational structure recognised by the state'. When the provision of Article 6(2)(a) of the Decree is taken in context of the Ordinance, it appears that state recognition is required by a religious organisation before it may apply for registration.

Finally, Article 8(2)(e) of the Decree effectively denies eligibility to many house church organisations in Vietnam to gain legal recognition, stipulating that religious organisations must have been in 'stable operation' for twenty years prior to the effective date of the Ordinance. Alternatively, an organisation must carry out religious activities for twenty years; yet, during this period, it may be charged with illegal religious activity. As the house church movement, and the widespread embrace of Christianity by minority ethnic groups in the north-west provinces, began in the late 1980s, this large body of Protestant Christians is effectively excluded from official recognition.

## **5 Experiences & Reactions of Protestant Christians**

The 'litmus test' of the success of the new processes for official registration consists in whether they have created conditions in which religious freedom is more widely experienced. Article I of the Ordinance asserts that, '[t]he state guarantees freedom of religious belief and of religion for its citizens. Nobody is permitted to violate these freedoms.' The success of the Ordinance is therefore measured by whether such freedoms have been experienced by religious groups.

The new provisions were originally met with a cautious response from Protestant churches in Vietnam, given their prior distrust of government promises. The success of the system depended, to some extent, on a measure of goodwill being displayed towards unregistered churches, in order to develop a relationship of greater trust. However, the continued harassment experienced by many churches and individual Christians, including many known to CSW, has proven to be a major obstacle to this end.

### **5.1 Arbitrary Actions & Policies of Local Officials**

The diversity of experiences reported by Protestant Christians in many regions of Vietnam is testimony to an arbitrariness in the actions and policies of local authorities, from the provincial to the village level.

The lack of consistency in the administration of legal rights undermines the efficacy of any legislative provisions for Protestant Christians. While some provinces have reportedly seen improvements in the situation of religious freedom, such as Gia Lai, repression of Christian activities continues strongly in others, including particularly Dien Bien in the north and Dak Lak in the south. There is a strong need for the state to be encouraged to educate officials, particularly in the central highlands and northern provinces, concerning the rights of Protestant Christians.

The harassment of Christian communities is often instigated at a local level, unchecked by higher authorities. According to the testimony of a pastor from Quang Ngai Province, district-level officials informed one village Christian that they would do nothing to prevent village authorities from treating him as they wished. In instances such as these, the degree of tolerance for Christian activities is determined not by legal protections, but at the whim of officials at a grassroots level.

Testimonies from the northern provinces of the country reported the feared border police as being especially severe in their antagonism towards Christian activities. Several have reported that border security officials were responsible for physical assaults and threats against them.

Such actions from local authorities may also be instigated from a higher level. This was highlighted by a document which came to light in 2005 from Muong Nhe District, Dien Bien Province, an important example of official policy at a provincial level being discordant with the measures purported to bring about improvements in religious freedom in Vietnam. This document, released by District Task Force 184 in February 2005, outlined official policy to combat religious and criminal activities in the area.

The sub-heading of the document is translated, 'Mobilise people to fight against taking advantage of religion and belief, and against illegal religious propagation, and to eradicate gathering places which infringe on public security in Cha Gang commune, Muong Nhe District'. In particular, the document aims 'to prevent and resist taking advantage of religion and belief and illegal religious propagation in the areas inhabited by the ethnic minorities'. Among the individuals it targets are '[a]ll leaders who aggressively propagate illegal religion', and the ten villages it specifically mentions are all locations of Christian meeting places.



The particular focus on eliminating Christian activity is articulated in section 3.5: 'Increase the level of inspecting the areas where our campaigns have been implemented, to get the people to give up their religion and to return to their traditional beliefs and customs. At the same time, inspect the areas not yet infiltrated with the Vang Chu religion,<sup>2</sup> and resolutely determine not to allow anyone to take advantage and infect other places.'

The suspicion of religious activities is illustrated in section 3.7: 'Synchronise the use of many professional means to control and stop leaders who incite people to build houses of prayer illegally, or those who make connections under the guise of religion, both within and outside the country.'

A campaign is envisaged to achieve the stated aims (section 4): 'Organise for all the people to study the materials which the work team has studied, so the people will eradicate completely all the complicated places, and give up their religion and return to their traditional beliefs and customs. Make a diligent effort to implement the seven points recommended by District Task Force 184.'

## **5.2 Obstruction of Registration**

Among the clearest evidence of the arbitrariness of local officials is found in the experience of many Protestant leaders when attempting to register their churches.

A consistent pattern emerged whereby many have displayed good faith in the procedures by attempting to register, only to face greater harassment and threats as a result. In many cases, the registration papers submitted to the local authorities were refused, or the attempt to register resulted in the intensified persecution of the church leader, or even the whole Christian community in the village. Their experiences included interrogation and beatings at the hands of village- and district-level authorities, and border policemen. In some cases, the harassment of the Protestant Christian community of a village only began with the attempt to register. Experiences of this type account for the lack of trust of many Protestant leaders in the legal provisions for registration, and are likely to dissuade other unregistered congregations from attempting to register.

Church leaders, particularly in northern Vietnam, have also reported being informed by local authorities that the provisions for registration are not applicable to them. Similarly, others have reported church leaders in Dien Bien Province having been informed that they may not ask for registration. Such attempts to prevent Protestant house churches from obtaining legal registration reflect claims, including by the Lao Cai and Ha Giang provincial governments, that Christianity is not extant in this area or among the Hmong people. Such claims, promulgated through official channels, necessarily preclude official registration, which would acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of Christian congregations.

Regardless of the actual intentions of the Vietnamese government, whether benevolent or otherwise, the distrust generated by ongoing harassment has posed a genuine question among Protestant Christians as to whether the state employs a 'double policy' for registration. While the government insists it is allowing Protestant groups to register officially, their experiences in attempting to do so often indicate otherwise. Although the actions of local authorities may be explained in terms of their being unaware of the new laws, the apparent failure of the state to educate them has simply exacerbated the concerns about a double policy.

At best, this situation may be attributed to the arbitrary implementation of the law. However, this has created such a breach of trust for many Protestant congregations that the processes for official registration are of little practicable benefit.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the Hmong name for the Christian religion.

### **5.3 Forced Renunciations of Faith**

Attempts by the authorities at forcing Christians, especially those in local leadership, to renounce their faith, have been widely reported, including by pastors known to CSW in Ha Giang, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai provinces.

The methods whereby pastors are compelled to renounce their faith have included threats, beatings, interrogations, psychological pressure and inducement. One Hmong pastor was beaten and threatened with an electric baton during an interrogation in which police attempted to force him to renounce his faith; others have been threatened with imprisonment if they refused to renounce their faith.

In the case of one Protestant leader from Ha Giang Province, the attempt by police to force him to renounce his faith was linked to their claim that Christianity did not exist among the Hmong people. He was also accused by police of unfaithfulness to the Hmong tradition of his ancestors. Police required him to rebuild the pagan altar in his house, as evidence of his renunciation of Christian faith, though he refused to do so.

In some cases, the renunciation of faith is used as a condition for the receipt of different forms of assistance from the authorities. For example, one pastor reported that after his house sustained considerable damage during a storm, he was promised assistance to rebuild his roof, but only if he were to renounce his faith. Other sources have alleged that some local authorities in Dien Bien Province have withheld aid from Christian villagers as a result of their faith. Another pastor from Lao Cai reported that after land was confiscated from a group of Christians as a result of their fleeing, its return was promised on the condition that they surrender their faith.

### **5.4 Restrictions on Places of Worship**

Among some church leaders, there exists a level of optimism about increased freedom vis-à-vis places of worship, an issue which has hitherto constituted a considerable obstacle to religious freedom. Following the opening of the Plei Betel church in Gia Lai Province on 2 February 2006, the Rev. Thai Phuoc Truong, President of the ECVN(S), stated that this was the first church to be constructed in the central highlands from permanent materials during the last 30 years.

However, this positive reaction is tempered by the ongoing problems experienced by other church leaders. For example, a pastor from Quang Ngai reported authorities have failed to respond to repeated requests to legally register a place of worship. Although the church building with which he was associated was originally constructed without the relevant permissions, he reported a willingness and desire among the Christian community to act openly and in accordance with the law. He and others have sought co-operation with the authorities, though so far without success.

The issue of freedom of peaceful assembly is especially important, for the reason that Christian gatherings have proved to be especially vulnerable targets for attack. This is exemplified in the testimony of a pastor from Khanh Hoa Province, whose church gathering was broken up by police on several occasions throughout 2005. As the leader, he was interrogated by police and threatened with imprisonment if the church should continue to gather.

Other pastors have continued to report that their respective village churches are compelled to meet in the homes of local Christians, and expressed no hope of being permitted to register a church building. In a number of cases reported, village authorities, or those from a higher level, prohibited Christians from gathering together in one place, but only in their family units. In some cases, even family units have been banned from praying together.

This issue is related to that of official registration, as a legally-sanctioned place of worship may be indicative of a formal legal status enjoyed by the church. Indeed, Article 26 of the Ordinance stipulates that, 'The legal property of places of religious belief and of religious organisations is protected by law; any violation of this law is forbidden.'

## **6 Religious Prisoners of Conscience**

The number of religious prisoners in Vietnam has declined in recent years. Although some reports suggest that a large number of Protestants remain in prison in the central highlands, ostensibly in connection with uprisings in 2001 and 2004, the circumstances and legitimacy of these imprisonments are extremely difficult to accurately establish. This is particularly as a consequence of the overlap between the Dega movement and the Protestant community. CSW is therefore unable to publish any biographical data for individual prisoners.

## **7 Testimonies of Former Detainees**

### **7.1 Than Van Truong**

Than Van Truong is a former Communist Party official, who adopted Christian faith and became a pastor in the Vietnam Baptist General Conference. In this capacity, he sent Bibles, with personal letters, to a number of top officials in Vietnam, encouraging them to adopt Christian faith.

On 28 May 2003, he was arrested and accused of 'propagandising to resist the Socialist Republic of Vietnam'. He was imprisoned in Prison No. 55, Dong Nai Province. During his detention, he faced interrogations and threats, though the security officials provided no evidence relating to the charge against him. He was released after eight months, but was not allowed to leave the area of Dong Nai in which he lived.

However, many of his family members live in Bac Giang Province, northern Vietnam, and after his release, he wished to visit his elderly mother. He informed the police concerning his intentions, and sought their permission. On 3 June 2004, near the beginning of his journey, he was accosted and accused of violating the conditions of his release. He was placed under 'temporary detention' for four months. Police attempted to interrogate him, but he refused to cooperate, asserting that in eight months of interrogation they had failed to find him guilty of any crime. The police continued to threaten him, but he maintained his decision not to cooperate.

He was eventually accused of illusionary mental problems, and sent to the Bien Hoa Mental Hospital. For the first fifteen days of his detention, he was given injections of an unknown substance twice daily, and became very tired and lethargic. After this period, he was administered oral medicine instead. However, his supervisor recognised that he was not mentally ill, and rarely forced him to ingest the medicines. On the occasions when he was forced, he attempted to retain the medicines orally, before disposing of them. One of the doctors at the hospital, Dr Tam, recommended at least twice to the hospital officials that Truong be released. However, the higher officials maintained that he had committed religious infractions, and could not therefore be released. On 16 September 2005, a senior doctor at the hospital met with Truong, urging him to retract all statements and articles which he had written during his time in the hospital, including an article which suggested that Marxist-Leninist teaching should be withdrawn from Vietnamese universities. The doctor promised that if he withdrew these writings, he would be released the following day. Truong declined to accede to his request, but was nevertheless freed on 17 September 2005.

Two days later, Truong was visited by a delegation from the Fatherland Front, along with other officials, who brought him gifts. They maintained that he had not actually been imprisoned, but that he had simply been held temporarily in order that he might be investigated.

Following this visit, he became the target of persistent, low-level harassment. He was regularly followed by police; when he resumed churchgoing, he was followed and videotaped. He visited his family in Bac Giang Province, northern Vietnam, with the permission of the authorities, but before he arrived, local officials had visited to intimidate, harass and browbeat his relatives. Although Truong had not been able to attend the anniversary of his father's death,<sup>3</sup> his brother informed him that the police had appeared.

When Truong visited Bac Giang Province in January 2006, he reported to the police, who instructed the security officials of the local People's Committee to submit a report on him, despite having agreed he was committing no crime. He consented to this, but requested that he be given a copy of anything he signed. They agreed to this, but eventually he was not given a copy, as they insisted it was for them to decide whether or not he should receive one. During his stay in Bac Giang, he was defamed by officials, who accused him of belonging to an American religion, which was associated with a negative role in the Second Indochina War. They also ironically claimed that he belonged to the religion of Osama Bin Laden. Similar slanderous remarks were made to Truong's family, and those with whom he discussed his faith.

In Dong Nai Province, police continued to follow Truong, often intimidating and threatening those whom he visits, and slandering him and his religion. He reported that this harassment severely obstructed his ability to work effectively as a pastor; many were intimidated into abandoning their fledgling interest in Christianity. His house church was prevented from meeting, because its members felt unable to attend and were afraid to associate with Truong. Neighbours and friends were obstructed from visiting him, as a result of direct threats that they would be evicted from the commune. Even those who did visit preferred to communicate using notes, fearing that the house may be bugged.

Additionally, he experienced infringement on his property from the extension of neighbouring roofs or drainage. He suspected, though without clear evidence, that this may have occurred at the incitement of authorities.

Police informed neighbours and friends that they intended to arrest Truong again. Although no charges are outstanding against him, and he was reassured by the delegation which visited shortly after his release from the hospital, the constant following and harassment demonstrated to Truong and those around him that he was still treated with suspicion. Despite the fact that his is a 'model family', according to the testimony of his friends and neighbours, continued defamation and harassment from police created a difficult and awkward situation for him.

Truong also expressed concern about his current legal position. During his time in Bien Hoa Mental Hospital, he composed a petition to officials, protesting against his situation. He appealed to Article 3(16) of the Criminal Code, whereby he must be brought to trial if he made such a petition. Although he had been discharged from the hospital, his legal position was yet to be clarified. His petition legally required a response, but he received none. He expressed fear that while his petition is unanswered, he remains vulnerable to re-arrest; he is therefore anxious for confirmation of his current legal status, and has requested international assistance to this end.

He also composed a second petition, on 20 January 2006, in which he requested that his legal situation be clarified in writing. In addition to affording him legal protection, he expressed hope that written confirmation of his innocence would restore his good reputation, and render him less

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<sup>3</sup> The death anniversary is a significant occasion in Vietnam.

vulnerable to defamation within his community. He also requested the return of twenty legally-printed Bibles, which had been confiscated. He is aware that such confiscations are relatively commonplace, and is concerned that this issue be addressed.

## **7.2 Nguyen Hong Quang**

Nguyen Hong Quang, the well-known former Mennonite prisoner, has reported that the building which functions as his home and church has remained under constant surveillance since his release. His movement has also been restricted. During the first five months after his release, his house was raided by police around twenty times.

Quang has also reported that local police have visited the homes of members of the Mennonite congregation, instructing them that they should not attend the church.