

VIETNAM

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, but in practice, the government regulated and, in some cases, restricted religious freedom. The government generally respected the religious freedom of most registered and some unregistered religious groups; however, some registered and unregistered groups reported abuses. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. There were continued reports of abuses of religious freedom, including cases involving arrests, detentions and convictions. Other problems remained, especially at the provincial and village levels. These included slow or nonapproval of registration for some groups. There were reports of harsh treatment of detainees after a protest over the closing of a cemetery in Con Dau parish. Some Christian groups also reported harassment when they tried to hold Christmas services. However, the government also showed signs of progress; it facilitated the construction of hundreds of new places of worship, granted national recognition to two new religious groups, registered new congregations, permitted the expansion of charitable activities, and allowed large-scale worship services with more than 100,000 participants. The government and the Vatican continued discussions toward normalizing relations.

There were a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy in Hanoi and the consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City maintained 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 of State Hillary Clinton and other senior State Department officials raised religious freedom concerns with government officials and called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Religious freedom also was a central topic in the 2011 U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, held in Washington in November.

Section I. Religious Demography

More than half of the population is at least nominally Buddhist, with 10 percent of the population actively practicing Mahayana Buddhism (most of whom are of the majority ethnic group Kinh or Viet) and 1.2 percent of the population practicing Theravada Buddhism (approximately one million members of the Khmer minority in the south). Adherents of the Roman Catholic Church constitute 7 percent of the population. Catholicism is growing, with over 6 million adherents worshipping in 26 dioceses across the country. Cao Dai, a religion combining elements of many religions, is practiced by 2.5 to 4 percent of the population. Hoa Hao followers constitute 1.5 to 3 percent of the population. Estimates of the number of Protestants ranged from 1 to 2 percent of the population. Some Protestant denominations were officially recognized; others were registered locally, but have not attained national recognition. Muslim adherents number 70,000 to 80,000 or less than 0.1 percent of the population; approximately 40 percent of Muslims are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam.

Smaller religious communities that together comprise less than 0.1 percent of the population include 50,000 ethnic Cham who mostly practice a devotional form of Hinduism in the south-central coastal area, an estimated 8,000 members of the Baha'i Faith, and approximately 1,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) throughout the country. There is one Jewish temple in Ho Chi Minh City serving approximately 150 Jews, mainly foreign residents who live in the city.

Other citizens consider themselves nonreligious, or practice animism or the veneration of ancestors and national heroes.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14 percent of the population. 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'nong, among others). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom. 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. The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the 2005 Implementation Decree serve as the primary documents governing religious practice. Both documents reiterate citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion, but warn that the "abuse" of freedom of belief or religion "to undermine the country's peace, independence, and unity" is illegal, and religious activities must be suspended if they "negatively affect the cultural traditions of the nation."

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 Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) authority.

Under the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, the government has control and oversight of religious organizations, which must be officially registered or recognized. "Appropriate" lower-level authorities must approve leadership, activities, and the establishment of seminaries or 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; it no longer requires official government approval of these activities, although some local officials require additional permissions. In addition, the ordinance encourages religious groups to carry out charitable activities in health care and education, which were limited in the past.

Implementing Decree 22, 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, clerics, and activities to operate openly and apply for official recognition. 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 also clarifies the procedures for religious organizations and individual congregations seeking official recognition. 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. 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. 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 is not followed consistently. There is no specific mechanism for appeal in the ordinance, nor are the reasons for denying a request restricted in any way.

Decree 22 also states, “Acts to force citizens to follow a religion or renounce their faith...are not allowed.” The Prime Minister’s Instruction on Protestantism (issued in 2005) contained a similarly worded statement. Although government officials stated that forced conversions or renunciation of faith had always been illegal, these were the first legal documents to state so explicitly.

The decree and the Law on Land stipulate that religious organizations 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 it does not necessarily require 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 Committee on Religious Affairs (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.

There are 31 recognized religious organizations affiliated with 11 recognized religions (Buddhism, Islam, the Baha’i Faith, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, the Four Debts of Gratitude, Threefold Enlightened Truth Path, and Threefold Southern Tradition). Individual denominations within these recognized groups also must be registered. Some Buddhist, Protestant, and Hoa Hao sects do not participate in government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations.

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 approves the proposed items. However, other publishing houses have been able to print and distribute religion-related materials, and all bookstores are free to sell religious materials. The Bible is printed in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'ngong, and English. The government has not approved printing in modern H'mong.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools; however, it permits clergy to teach at universities in subjects in which they are qualified. Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Baha'i, and Buddhist groups are allowed to provide religious education to adherents in their facilities. Religious groups are not permitted to operate independent schools beyond preschool and kindergarten. Atheism is not taught officially in public schools.

Religious affiliation is indicated on citizens' national identification cards and in "family books," which are household identification documents. There were no reports of discrimination against individuals with a listed religious preference. 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, most converts find the procedures overly cumbersome and are typically unable to change their classification.

In principle prisoners do not have the right to manifest their religious beliefs or practices in communal prison spaces. However, there were confirmed reports of prisoners being allowed to read the Bible and practice their beliefs while incarcerated.

The officially sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) incorporates Mahayana, Theravada, and Bhikshu Buddhism. All Buddhist groups within the VBS are represented proportionally throughout the leadership structure and organization. In practice, Theravada monks meet separately to determine issues such as doctrine, education, and other community needs to address within the VBS. There are several recently recognized religious organizations that have Buddhist influences but are separate and distinct from the VBS. Of these, the Pure-Land

Buddhist Home Practice religious group has the largest membership, with more than 1.3 million followers.

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

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

Government Practices

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.

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees and reports of individuals and congregants being monitored and harassed. Reports of abuses of religious freedom remained at a consistent level compared with the previous year.

In March authorities of An Giang, Dong Thap, Vinh Long, and Can Tho ordered surveillance of unsanctioned Hoa Hao monks to prevent followers from commemorating the March 29 disappearance of the Hoa Hao founder. Police blocked roads and harassed or threatened followers. Police beat one follower severely.

Protestant Khmers 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.

Two lay preachers, Ksor Y Du and Kpa Y Ko, remained in prison as a result of convictions and sentences for attempting to organize demonstrations, causing political and security disorder, and dividing national solidarity.

In November Pastor Do Van Tinh reported that family members and neighbors opposed to the Agape Baptist church attacked Pastor Nguyen Danh Chau and parishioners. Pastor Tinh reported that security forces did not take part in the beating but were slow to react and only came to the assistance of churchgoers after the crowd continued to grow.

In October one Falun Gong adherent reported that although a group of Falun Gong practitioners had held weekly Falun Gong exercises in a Ho Chi Minh City park since 2009, police arrested seven of 25 Falun Gong practitioners in Ho Chi Minh City and detained them for eight hours. Two of the seven detainees did not have identification documents with them, and police transferred them to a Social Protection Center. They were released within 24 hours.

In June Tran Van Nhon from Dong Thap Province reported that commune authorities illegally confiscated 700 to 800 square meters (7,500 -8,000 sq feet) of this commune's original 1,000 square meters (10,700 sq feet) of land without compensation. Nhon reported that he used the land to hold Hoa Hao worship services. Tong Thiet Linh, also from Dong Thap Province, reported that he stopped holding Hoa Hao worship services in his home after local police issued a citation and threatened to arrest Linh if he did not stop holding services as an unregistered church.

In May, 5,000 members of the ethnic H'mong community in Muong Nhe District in Dien Bien Province gathered as part of a millennium movement. Security personnel dispersed the crowd and arrested 150 individuals. There were reports that up to three children became ill and died due to the difficult weather conditions in a makeshift camp built by ethnic H'mong.

Individuals and churches affiliated with Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, including the Vietnam People's Christian Evangelical Fellowship Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Vietnam, were prevented at times from holding services due to Chinh's strong denunciations of the government and communism. The government continued to claim that Chinh had used his position to conduct political activities. Chinh was arrested on April 28 for "sabotaging the great national unity policy" for sharing his thoughts with foreign media outlets on political and religious issues and criticizing the government and communism. At year's end, he remained in detention and his family has not been allowed to visit him.

In November 2010 authorities arrested Vu Duc Trung and Le Van Thanh, affiliated with the Falun Gong movement, in Hanoi for illegally broadcasting spiritual as well as political messages into China. In February the Hanoi People's court convicted Trung and Thanh for "illegally broadcasting information and operating information networks without a license" and sentenced them to three and two years' imprisonment, respectively.

In addition to reports of physical abuse and of religious prisoners and detainees, there were reports of other abuses of religious freedom during the year.

On July 20, local police dismantled a Cao Dai temple in Phan Rang city, Ninh Thuan Province. Prior to the temple being demolished, local officials demanded that the land be handed over to them. When Cao Dai adherents protested, local officials forcibly removed the Cao Dai followers, razed the temple, and confiscated the land without compensation. There were no new developments by year's end.

On July 10, Redemptorist Provincial Superior Pham Trung Thanh was prevented from leaving the country for a religious conference in Singapore. On July 12, Father Dinh Huu Thoai, chief of office of the Redemptorist Church of Vietnam, was stopped at a border crossing while on the way to Cambodia.

In July commune officials threatened to withhold financial support to help poor households if certain members of the Church of Pha Khau village, Phinh Giang commune in Dien Bien, did not stop attending services. Commune officials regularly followed believers and instructed them not to follow "organized religion" and instead return to ancestor worship, according to parishioners.

Some religious believers continued to report being intimidated by local security officials not to attend religious services, particularly those whose organizations had not applied for or been granted legal sanction. Harassment occurred in some cases when an organization attempted to upgrade its status, i.e., to move from an unregistered status to registered, or from registered to recognized. In a number of instances, local officials forced church gatherings to disperse, advised or required groups to limit important celebrations in scope or content, closed unregistered house churches, and pressured individuals to renounce their religious beliefs.

There were also reports of restrictions on religious freedom. Several unrecognized Protestant denominations were prohibited from holding large-scale Christmas services in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, and Thanh Hoa.

At year's end, the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and other denominations continued to seek restitution of properties seized by the government.

The United Baptist Church reported in December that authorities in Da Nang Province who were opposed to unregistered churches pressured it to join the registered church.

The SECV reported that the CRA issued an edict in November denying its request to revert to its pre-1975 organizational structure with districts underneath the central church's control. The CRA stated that three-tiered leadership structures are not permitted under the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. The SECV said that this edict complicates its ability to manage its internal affairs. Early in the year, SECV and ECVN jointly submitted a common charter for a unified Protestant church which would establish a provincial-level management institution. The government's Committee for Religious Affairs did not support the decision and both churches continued to operate as separate entities.

In September the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) reported that officials invited monks and nuns to working sessions with police officials a day before Vu Lan, an important religious holiday, and recorded the names of followers who visited. On the holiday, local authorities dispersed crowds.

In May, the Danang People's Committee advised the unsanctioned Buddhist church to refrain from hanging religious banners or images in public and from reading messages from one of their monks on Vesak, the commemoration of the Buddha's birthday.

In Soc Trang and the Go Vap district of Ho Chi Minh City, Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) congregations that applied for local registration were physically harassed. The local authorities convened neighborhood meetings to collect opinions from residents about the application. Residents voted "100 percent" against the JW registration, and in May officials denied the JW application on that basis, citing "possible civil disorder."

The Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF) tried to organize an event for well-known international Pastor Luis Palau on April 15-16 in Hanoi, but government officials insisted the event needed to be organized by a government sanctioned church. Without enough time to make the proper arrangements, the event in Hanoi was cancelled.

In January authorities asked followers of the unsanctioned Buddhist Church of Vietnam to cancel or limit the opening ceremony of a yearly catechism retreat. The day after the ceremony, police summoned followers to working sessions to discuss the content of the retreat.

In January police interrupted a gathering of 50 Assemblies of God followers, 30 of whom were ethnic Khmer, issued a citation for illegally gathering and preaching, and confiscated prayer books and Bibles. The congregation was registered locally but encountered problems when attempting to change its meeting place. The congregation sent prior notice to authorities of the proposed change but did not receive an answer. After the citation, authorities declared the group's registration incomplete and asked for a list of all attendees (which was illegal, according to the Ordinance on Religion). Some authorities warned Khmer members that they could lose social benefits by continued adherence to the church.

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

Local officials from villages in the Northwestern provinces attempted 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.

Implementation of the legal framework on religion at lower levels of the government continued to be mixed. During the year, national and provincial authorities held a number of training courses for lower-level officials about the new laws to assure their understanding and compliance with the Ordinance on Religion and Belief.

Adherence to a religious group generally did not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernment civil, economic, and secular life, although unofficial policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and military prevented advancement by religious adherents. Practitioners of various religious groups served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Some religious organizations, such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), as well as clergy and religious followers, were members of the

CPV-affiliated mass political and social organization, the Vietnam Fatherland Front. High-ranking government officials sent greetings and visited churches during Christmas and Easter as well as attended Vesak day (a commemoration of the birth of Buddha) activities.

Most religious groups reported that their ability to meet openly for religious worship improved. However, the government required the registration of all activities by religious groups and used this requirement to restrict and discourage participation in certain unrecognized religious groups, including the UBCV and some Protestant and Hoa Hao groups.

Because of the lack of due process and inconsistent oversight, religious activities were 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. Recognized and unrecognized Protestant groups were sometimes able to overcome local harassment or to overturn negative local decisions after they appealed to higher-level authorities.

Unregistered religious groups could be vulnerable to coercive and punitive action by national and local authorities. In some parts of the country, local authorities tacitly approved of the activities of unregistered groups and did not interfere with them. In other areas local officials restricted the same activities. Some unregistered groups were moving towards national registration and recognition, but others chose not to seek registration.

The government stated that it continued to monitor the activities of certain religious groups because of their political activism. The government invoked national security and solidarity provisions in the constitution to override laws and regulations providing for religious freedom, including impeding some religious gatherings and blocking attempts by religious groups to proselytize to certain ethnic groups in border regions deemed to be sensitive as well as in the central highlands.

During the year, the government granted national recognition to two religious organizations: the Provisional Representative Board of Muslim Community in Ninh Thuan Province and the Vietnam Cao Dai Church in Binh Duc Province.

Several hundred ECVN congregations continued to await action on their applications to register. Reasons cited for delays included bureaucratic impediments such as not following correct procedures in completing forms or

providing incomplete information. Local authorities also cited vague security concerns, stating that their political authority could be threatened or that confrontations could occur between traditional believers and recently converted Christians. During the year local authorities registered five to 10 new Evangelical congregations compared to 2010, when approximately 30 ECVN congregations were registered.

The Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, an association of registered and unregistered denominations, reported that it was not permitted to register at the national level.

The government continued to restrict the movement of some UBCV leaders, although the UBCV operated many pagodas without restriction. As in previous years, 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. While the government restricted most UBCV charitable activities, senior UBCV monks travelled in early January to distribute food aid to flood-stricken areas of the country. The UBCV reported having 20 representative boards in 15 cities and provinces. Provincial leaders of the UBCV throughout the southern region reported routine surveillance by local authorities. UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do stated he could meet with others inside and outside the pagoda.

The Hoa Hao Administrative Council is the officially recognized Hoa Hao body; however, several leaders of the Hoa Hao community openly criticized the council as overly subservient to the government. Dissenting Hoa Hao groups formed two smaller churches, the Traditional Hoa Hao Church and the Pure Hoa Hao Church. They faced some restrictions on their religious and political activities. The government prohibited commemorations of the disappearance of the Hoa Hao's founder and readings of his writings. The government permitted publication of only five of the 10 Hoa Hao sacred books.

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.

The government continued to assert that some Montagnards, an ethnic minority in the Central Highlands, were operating an illegal "Dega" church. The government accused the Dega Protestant churches of calling for the creation of an independent

Montagnard state. The SECV and house churches in the provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Binh Phuoc, Phu Yen, and Dak Nong continued to experience government scrutiny because of feared association with separatist groups overseas.

The Religious Publishing House did not act on a longstanding request to allow printing of the Bible in the modern form of the H'mong language. The reason given for the delay was 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.

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 years 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.

The movements of a number of UBCV, Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Protestant dignitaries and believers were occasionally restricted or monitored by police.

ECVN contacts in the Northwest Highlands confirmed that local authorities allowed some unregistered congregations to worship in their homes and to meet openly, in accordance with the prime minister's 2005 instruction. Catholics and Protestants were able to celebrate Easter Mass in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Some improvements in respect for religious freedom continued during the year. The government continued to ease restrictions placed upon most religious groups. 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. For the second year in a row, the government permitted large religious gatherings, such as annual Catholic celebrations at the La Vang Catholic sanctuary. Large celebrations were held in honor of Vesak in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and many other cities. In November a Catholic orphanage for AIDS-affected children was granted permission to operate from the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee, the first time the government has permitted religious control of a social, health, or education entity.

In October government authorities in Quang Binh Province returned property formerly owned by the Catholic Church after decades of petitions submitted by parishioners. Father Thien, parish priest in Trung Quang, stated that the government facility was being used as a nursery and that the church plans to build a new school.

As in previous years, the CRA, in cooperation with the Institute for Global Engagement, held three training courses with local and provincial level officials and local church leaders in Cao Bang, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien Provinces in the summer and fall. During the year more local officials participated in the training sessions than had in previous years.

Since his appointment in January, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, the non-resident papal representative to Vietnam, made four separate two-week visits to the country. During his first visit in April, Archbishop Girelli took part in the first annual conference of Vietnam's Bishop Council held in Ho Chi Minh City from April 25-29. During a visit in September, the archbishop was granted permission by the government to make his first visit to Hue, where he broke new ground by being the first senior Vatican official to be granted permission to stay in church-owned accommodations. During this visit, the archbishop was also granted permission to visit Quang Tri province and allowed to meet privately with clergy and parishioners and to celebrate Mass in the national shrine of Our Lady of La Vang. The government and the Vatican continued discussions toward normalizing relations.

From April 23-24, the Baha'i Community of Vietnam held its fourth National Congress in the southern city of Phan Thiet, Binh Thuan Province. More than 300 members of the Baha'i Faith gathered for the annual election of their national nine-member religious administrative board known as the National Spiritual Assembly. During the gathering, for the first time the government allowed Baha'i representatives from other regional nations to join the event and actively participate. Members of the community were joined by representatives from the Baha'i Advisory Board for Asia and its Board of Trustees for Southeast Asia.

The government continued the positive trend of meeting with religious leaders from a variety of denominations to discuss registration and recognition procedures, which included local and international representatives affiliated with Methodist and other Protestant denominations, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. As noted

earlier, the government granted national recognition to two more religious groups during the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In October local gang members attacked a Vietnam Baptist Church (VBC) house church in Phu Quy village in Quang Nam Province. Adherents were threatened to stop worshipping at the church or face physical assault.

An SECV Protestant congregation and its pastor in Xi Thoai Village in Phu Yen Province were subjected to three attacks by a gang of local thugs in June and July. The gang beat the pastor's wife and destroyed his home. Local officials denied involvement, promised to investigate the incident, and met with church leaders to apologize. One of the attackers later was suspended from a police school, and two others were denied admittance to the army after their participation in the attack was confirmed. In December the deputy CPV chief for the province met with the SECV and reaffirmed local authorities' promises to investigate the earlier abuse.

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 Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and Haiphong, 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 Hoa Hao Executive Council also continued to be very active in local charitable and development projects, including building an average of 800 houses per year for impoverished families regardless of religious affiliation. The Hoa Hao also spent significant resources on managing local health clinics. Hoa Hao, Muslims, and Protestants engaged in aid programs, contributing over 313 trillion VND (\$15 million) collectively throughout the year. Their efforts included assisting persons with HIV/AIDS, disaster relief, and work with orphans and at-risk children. A large number of faith-based nongovernmental organizations conducted and expanded their charitable activities, supported by private donors, international organizations, and foreign governments. The Catholic charity Caritas held training courses for social workers assisting persons with HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. The charity also conducted disaster relief

operations, providing assistance to typhoon victims. Caritas' total contributions throughout the year were 21.84 billion VND (\$1.15 million).

In June the Southern Evangelical and Northern Evangelical Churches of Vietnam co-celebrated the 100th anniversary of Protestantism in Vietnam. The ceremony in Da Nang attracted nearly 20,000 participants while the celebration in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City drew 6,000-8,000 participants.

From June 17-18, the Institute for Global Engagement, along with the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences Institute for Religious Studies (IRS) and Brigham Young University, sponsored the third conference on Rule of Law and Religion in Hanoi. The two-day conference, attended by government officials and various scholars, focused on discussion of the legal framework on religion and comparative approaches to enabling the positive role of religion in society.

No statistics were available on the level of participation in formal religious services, but it was generally acknowledged that this number has continued to increase since 2000.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy in Hanoi and the consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of CPV leaders and government officials, including the president, prime minister, and senior officials 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 embassy and the consulate general also maintained regular contact with religious leaders and dissidents throughout the country and routinely visited them.

Secretary of State Clinton, in meetings with government officials, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Other senior State Department officials also raised religious freedom during their meetings with government officials during the year. Religious freedom was a focus of the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in November.

The ambassador and embassy officers urged recognition of a broad spectrum of religious groups, including the UBCV, Protestant house churches, and dissenting Hoa Hao groups, sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups, and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. The ambassador and embassy

officials raised specific cases of government harassment against Catholics, the UBCV, unrecognized Hoa Hao sects, and Protestant churches with the CRA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Public Security. The ambassador also requested the government to investigate alleged abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. Embassy officials called for the registration of churches and peaceful resolution of long-standing property disputes. U.S. government officials also repeatedly urged the government to resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious organizations peacefully.

Embassy and consulate general officials traveled throughout the country to monitor the religious freedom environment, meet with religious leaders, and stress to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship. Representatives of the embassy and the consulate general had frequent contact with leaders of all major religious communities. Embassy and consulate general officers also met regularly with provincial representative boards of more than 25 Protestant groups from a wide variety of theological backgrounds, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands. The embassy and consulate general held several religious freedom roundtables during the year to receive updates from recognized Protestant churches and unrecognized house churches on the status of religious freedom.