

VIETNAM 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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 of these groups reported abuses. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. 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, including slow or denied approval of registration for some groups. Some Christian groups also reported harassment or administrative obstacles when they tried to hold Christmas services. However, the government also showed signs of progress: it registered new congregations, permitted the expansion of charitable activities, and allowed large-scale worship services with more than 100,000 participants.

There were 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. The secretary of state, the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, and other senior State Department officials raised religious freedom concerns with government officials and called for continued improvements in religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to 2011 information from the General Statistics Office, the population is approximately 87.8 million. More than half of the population is at least nominally Buddhist, with 10 percent actively practicing Mahayana Buddhism (most of whom are of the majority ethnic group Kinh or Viet) and 1.2 percent actively practicing Theravada Buddhism (approximately one million members of the Khmer minority in the south). Roman Catholics constitute 7 percent of the population. Catholicism is growing, with over 6 million adherents worshiping in 26 dioceses across the country. Cao Dai, a religion combining elements of many religions, is practiced by

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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 range from 1 to 2 percent of the population. Some Protestant denominations are officially recognized at the national level; others are registered locally, but have not attained national recognition. Muslims 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 groups 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 Bahai Faith, and approximately 1,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) throughout the country. There is one Jewish synagogue 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, tutelary and protective saints, national heroes and local, respected persons. Followers of these traditional forms of worship may or may not term themselves religious.

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 for nonbelief; however, restrictions exist in policy. The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the 2005 Implementation Decree (Decree 22) serve as the primary documents governing religious practice. Both the ordinance and the 2005 decree 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,

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and unity” is illegal, and religious activities must be suspended if they “negatively affect the cultural traditions of the nation.” In November the government issued Decree 92/2012 to replace Decree 22/ 2005 on January 1, 2013.

The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) describes Decree 92 as a vehicle for adding administrative improvements to the original 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion and Decree 22. It reduces by half the stipulated time frames for government responses to local and national applications for registration and recognition. Moreover, the CRA says Decree 92 now folds into one place laws and regulations that were formerly contained in other legal documents, and includes all forms of religious practice. However, critics of the new decree are concerned that the decree constitutes a further restriction of religious practice. They note that, despite shorter response time frames for requests, there are no penalties for late or arbitrary responses, and that new Decree 92 articles increase the number of approvals required, which will mean more local and national government involvement in religious activities. They point to additional requirements governing foreign nationals involved in religious training, ordination, and leadership, outlining management and curriculum guidelines for religious training institutions, and extending timeframes for recognition.

Although the government announced an effective date of January 1, 2013 for Decree 92, its effect on actual religious practice and registrations and recognitions will be determined by the government’s implementing circulars and documents, which were still in preparation at year’s end.

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 continues to limit the organized activities of independent religious groups and of individuals who are regarded as a threat to Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) authority.

Under the Ordinance on Religion and Belief (2004), the government has control and oversight of religious organizations, which must be officially registered or recognized. The Ordinance stipulates that “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 approval from authorities 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

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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.

Decree 22, issued in 2005, provides further guidance on the 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief. The government prescribes a multi-stage process toward national recognition (government sanction of religious practice by a religious group). To operate openly, an unrecognized religious organization must first register its places of worship, its clerics, and its activities in each local administrative area in which it operates by filing information with relevant authorities about its structure, leadership, and activities. Local registration confers the privilege to operate in the administrative locality. The next step is national registration, which requires that the group document 20 years of stable religious operation in Vietnam (past operation in the country can be counted toward this requirement). National registration requires a license from the CRA. After maintaining national registration for one year, an eligible religious group can apply for full legal recognition after hosting a national convention during which it elects leaders. The group must receive government approval of its leadership, structure, and activities. Full recognition confers the privilege of opening, operating, and refurbishing places of worship, training religious leaders, and publishing materials.

For each stage of the registration and recognition application process, the government specifies time limits for official response (30, 45, 60, or 90 days, depending on the scope of the request), and requires that written explanations be given for any rejected applications. However, government officials rarely adhere to these response times and often do not include specific reasons for refusals. There is no 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) contains a similarly worded statement. Although government officials state that forced conversions or renunciation of faith have always been illegal, these are 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

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the province, after which the land is granted 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 CRA is charged with disseminating information to authorities about the legal framework on religion at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels and assuring uniform compliance.

The government recognizes 37 religious organizations affiliated with 11 recognized religions. The 11 recognized religions are: Buddhism, Islam, the Bahai 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 groups do not participate in government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations.

The government requires that all religious publishing be done by the Religious Publishing House, which is part of the State Publishing House 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 religious 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, Bahai, and Buddhist groups are allowed to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities. Religious groups are not permitted to operate independent schools beyond the preschool and kindergarten levels. 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

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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 are 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 conduct 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 controls 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

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, 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.

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

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religious groups were potentially vulnerable to harassment, as well as coercive and punitive actions by national and local authorities. In some parts of the country, local authorities tacitly approved 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.

Authorities in An Giang and Dong Thap provinces continued to harass and abuse followers of the unsanctioned Traditional Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. In July police arrested Bui Van Tham without a warrant. In September Tham was tried and sentenced to two years and six months in prison for opposing the state. On October 30, his father, Bui Van Tham, was arrested on the same charge.

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, 2011 for "sabotaging the great national unity policy," i.e., for sharing his thoughts with foreign media outlets on political and religious issues and criticizing the government and communism. In July 2012, an appeals court upheld Chinh's 11 year sentence, announced in March, for sabotaging the nation's unity policy and for divisive activities. He remained imprisoned in Pleiku City at year's end.

In July the State ordered the defrocking of Thach Thoul, the Khmer Krom Buddhist monk of a Theravada pagoda in Soc Trang province, for vague accusations of violating the regulations of the state-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. Thach Thoul was accused of having close connections with and sending reports about human right violations to foreign organizations and media. He was also reported to have links with another monk, Kim Moul, who was previously defrocked and imprisoned for demonstrating for religious freedom in 2007.

In May 2010, there were reports of beatings and intimidation of individuals detained after they protested the closing of a cemetery in Con Dau parish. Although there were no reports of detention or harsh treatment of Con Dau parishioners in 2011, during the year there were reports of coercion and intimidation of the Con Dau families who were still refusing to move from the parish under a new resettlement project. Da Nang City estimated the number of the opposing families at nearly 30 while other sources cited 100.

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On May 5, numerous local police along with reporters threatened and assaulted worshipers at a Cao Dai Temple in Long An province. The government had assigned a new leader to that temple. Members of the temple rejected the new leader's authority. According to one worshiper, police asked many people to leave, saying the temple belonged to a state-recognized church and they should follow the assigned leader.

On August 6, Superior Buddhist monk Thich Khong Tanh organized a meeting at the unsanctioned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) Lien Tri Pagoda in District 2. Security forces surrounded the pagoda and prevented a number of religious dignitaries, former prisoners of conscience, and wounded soldiers of the former Republic of Vietnam from participating in ceremonies there. Tanh said police blocked and arrested several people, preventing them from attending the meeting at Lien Tri Pagoda.

In March international media reported that Vietnam revoked visas for a Vatican delegation intent on advancing the beatification of the late Cardinal Francois-Xavier Van Thuan. The Vatican experts planned to speak to people who had known the cardinal. Eglises d'Asie (Churches of Asia), the Paris Foreign Missions Society information agency, cited sources who said the beatification plans had angered Hanoi, whose ties with the Vatican have long been strained. Thuan was the nephew of Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam's first president. Thuan was forced into exile in Rome after he was freed from a Vietnamese detention camp in 1989. Pope John Paul II later made Thuan a cardinal.

In April the Catholic Redemptorist Order submitted documents to the municipal People's Committee to register the ordination of its seven priests in accordance with government Decree 22 of 2005. In June the Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) CRA responded to the submission, claiming the registration documents did not meet the requirements, and asked for supplemental paperwork. The Redemptorist Order requested that the HCMC People's Committee comment on the municipal CRA's interference since, according to regulations, only the People's Committee can give feedback on church documents, not the municipal CRA.

In May the head monk of Giac Minh pagoda in Da Nang City reported isolation and surveillance at the pagoda for the past three years. Authorities prevented Buddhists from other districts and provinces from attending Vesak services. Plainclothes policemen turned away visitors, claimed the pagoda did not exist, and

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claimed the pagoda leader was a false monk who was working illegally and receiving money from overseas.

After being stopped at a border crossing while on the way to Cambodia in July, 2011, Father Dinh Huu Thoai, chief of office of the Redemptorist Church of Vietnam, protested the ban on his travel with several government agencies, as well as the Tay Ninh Provincial Court. Thoai filed the most recent complaint in August. Authorities informed him verbally that the foreign travel ban was to last until 2015, although there was no official statement to that effect.

In previous years, local officials from villages in the northwestern provinces had 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. According to parishioners of the church in Pha Khau village, Phinh Giang commune in Dien Bien, commune officials continued to carry out regular surveillance on believers and instructed them to stop following "organized religion" and instead return to ancestor worship. Parishioners from Pha Khau village and other northwestern communities reported that the level of harassment from local authorities had decreased dramatically compared to 2011, but that officials continued to monitor individuals.

Some religious believers, particularly members of organizations that had not applied for or been granted legal sanction, continued to report intimidation by local security officials about attending religious services. 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 celebrations or expression. Several unrecognized Protestant denominations were prohibited from holding large-scale Christmas services in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang City, and Thanh Hoa province.

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 SECV reported authorities at different levels had promised to handle the case.

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Local authorities continued strict surveillance of unsanctioned Hoa Hao monks and blocked arrivals of followers during Hoa Hao commemoration days, including the commemoration of the disappearance day of the Hoa Hao founder on March 29. Most of the recorded restrictions were in An Giang province.

During the year, the government did not harass and intimidate Protestant Khmers as it had in 2011. However, the government requested that congregants relocate their place of worship. At year's end, the government had not yet approved their applications for registration.

In December 2011, an unrecognized United Baptist Church (UBC) reported that authorities in Da Nang City who were opposed to unregistered churches pressured them to join the registered church. However, during the year, the leader of the church reported that even when its congregations agreed to join other registered churches in the city, local authorities rejected their registration applications. Authorities did not grant registration certificates to any new congregations of the UBC church during the year.

Early in the year, the SECV and ECVN jointly submitted a common charter for a unified Protestant church that would establish a provincial-level management institution. The central CRA did not respond and both churches continued to operate as separate entities. The SECV reported that from October 2010 to October 2012, the SECV and ECVN jointly submitted three official letters proposing a merger to the prime minister and the central CRA, but had received no response by year's end.

On major Buddhist festivals such as the Vesak, the Buddha's birthday, and Vu Lan, the authorities blocked the entry and exits for pagodas affiliated with the unsanctioned UBCV and banned the pagodas from organizing services for the public in Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang City, and Thua Thien-Hue, Quang Nam, Phu Yen and Binh Thuan provinces.

During the year, authorities insisted that an ethnic Khmer congregation relocate to a previously registered meeting place to worship. The congregation had reported harassment by local authorities in 2011 after attempting to move to a new meeting place. Once the congregation moved back to its original meeting place, it reported no problems in conducting religious activities. Authorities did not state why they rejected the new meeting place.

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During the year, some house churches affiliated with the Assemblies of God (AOG) in District 3 and Can Gio of Ho Chi Minh City were not allowed to operate. Groups that submitted registration applications did not receive positive responses from authorities. Authorities asked the AOG to consolidate several meeting points to make fewer sites; however, this was impossible, since the existing meeting houses were too small to accommodate several hundred followers. The AOG also had problems registering churches in other northern provinces including Bac Giang, Thai Nguyen, and Son La. Although the AOG received a national registration certificate in 2010 and held the required national conference, by year's end it had yet to receive national recognition because the government did not accept its three-tiered management structure.

In past years, police actively dispersed meetings of Inter-Evangelistic Movement (IEM) worshippers, local authorities refused to register IEM meeting points, and authorities pressured followers to abandon their religion. Congregants reported that during the year local security officials were much more tolerant of religious services but continued to monitor individuals.

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 ensure their understanding and compliance with the Ordinance on Religion and Belief.

Adherence to a religious group generally did not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernmental civil, economic, and secular life, although unofficial policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the military prevented advancement by religious adherents in the government and military. Practitioners of various religions served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Some religious organizations, such as the 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 and attended Vesak Day 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.

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The Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions received approval from the Committee for Religious Affairs to organize an international conference from November 1 to 26 in Ho Chi Minh City, which included activities commemorating its 150th anniversary in Vietnam. The conference was attended by local and foreign priests and superiors from 16 nations and territories.

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.

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. This included 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.

No new religious organizations received national recognition during the year.

Several hundred ECVN congregations continued to await action on their applications to register as local meeting places. Authorities cited bureaucratic impediments such as failing to complete forms correctly or providing incomplete information as reasons for delays. 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. In August and July the CRA confirmed 20 new church registrations in the Northwest Highlands, compared to five congregations registered in 2011, and 30 in 2010.

Several new SECV congregations were granted recognition in provinces including Lam Dong, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Dong Nai. About 10 new churches were built in provinces including Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Quang Nam, An Giang, and Kien Giang.

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During the year, local authorities allowed the reconstruction of the meeting place of an SECV congregation in Xi Thoai Village in Phu Yen Province and allowed followers to conduct religious activities there. This church had been attacked three times in 2011.

The government continued to restrict the movement of some UBCV leaders. 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. Provincial UBCV leaders throughout the southern region reported routine surveillance by local authorities. UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do stated that although he could meet diplomats within his pagoda, other people were prevented from visiting or were questioned after contacting him. Authorities continued to ban the entry of Buddhist followers into UBCV pagodas. UBCV representatives reported they were not allowed to conduct disaster relief activities during the year, unlike 2011, when they were able to do so.

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. The government permitted publication of only five of the 10 Hoa Hao sacred books for sanctioned Hoa Hao groups. No new books were authorized for publication during the year.

Dissenting Hoa Hao groups, the Traditional Hoa Hao Church and the Pure Hoa Hao Church, faced restrictions on their religious and political activities. The government prohibited their commemorations of the disappearance of the Hoa Hao founder and public readings of his writings. Police regularly discouraged worshipers from visiting temples and facilities affiliated with the unrecognized Pure Hoa Hao Church and Traditional Hoa Hao Buddhist 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. In previous years, ethnic minority worshippers in the Central Highlands –

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particularly in areas suspected to be affiliated with the “Dega” church – continued to be prevented from gathering to worship. During the year, 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 local officials were reprimanded.

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.

Police occasionally restricted or monitored the movements of several UBCV, Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Protestant dignitaries and believers.

In August local authorities requested that Catholic followers in Dakpnan leprosy village in Gia Lai Province dismantle a chapel they had used over an extended time. Villagers were requested to move statues from the chapel and to dismantle a bell tower. When followers tried to set up a house as an ad hoc replacement chapel, authorities forced them to dismantle it.

Catholics and Protestants were able to celebrate Easter mass and religious observances in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang during the year. For the third 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.

The government continued to ease restrictions placed upon most religious groups. The changes were primarily the result of continued application of revisions to the legal framework governing religion instituted in 2004 and 2005, as well as a more positive government attitude toward Protestant groups.

As in previous years, the CRA, in cooperation with the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), 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. The training provided instruction about religious freedom and protection for religious believers under Vietnamese law. During the year more local officials participated in the training sessions than in previous years.

The IGE, with the support of the CRA, hosted a separate 10-day training course for mid-level government officials on “Religion and Rule of Law” in Hanoi from November 26-30. This course focused on the fundamental need for governments

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to respect the rights of all members of society and the importance of diversity of thought and belief. The IGE also signed a memorandum of understanding with the government focused on efforts to deepen the discussion on religious freedom, rule of law, and good governance.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In May the government for the first time granted 20 members of the Bahai Faith permission to participate in an annual religious pilgrimage to the Bahai World Center in Haifa, Israel. The nine-day pilgrimage allowed Bahais to visit religious shrines and meet with fellow believers. In August the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Hanoi celebrated the twentieth anniversary of its establishment in Hanoi. The day-long public celebration was attended by nearly 100 followers from the northern area of the country, 20 foreign Bahais representing countries in the region, and government officials.

In July and August the CRA registered 20 new churches in the Northwest Highlands. These included both Protestant and Catholic congregations.

During his appointment that began in January 2011, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, the non-resident papal representative to Vietnam, made eight visits to the country. The government and the Vatican continued discussions toward normalizing relations. In September Archbishop Girelli made his first visit to the Northwest Highlands to meet with fellow believers. During his visit, the archbishop led mass for congregants of newly recognized churches.

In June the government restored five acres of land to St. Peter's Catholic chapel in Hanoi. Congregants had formally petitioned the government ten years earlier.

According to contacts from multiple faiths, the government facilitated the construction of new places of worship, including Christian churches, Buddhist temples, monasteries and pagodas. The government's assistance included transferring land to religious groups, granting building permits, or granting small construction grants through the CRA.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

On September 16, the managing council of the sanctioned Cao Dai along with hired thugs assaulted followers of the unsanctioned Cao Dai religion in Phu My Oratory, which is under the Chon Truyen Conservative Religious Society in Binh Dinh Province. A total of six followers suffered injuries. The head of the managing council stated that the reason for the assault was that the followers were worshipping according to “Chon Truyen law, instead of obeying the managing council.”

In August an estimated 200,000 Catholics joined the Assumption Day celebration at La Vang sanctuary. The Vietnamese Episcopal Conference launched construction of the Chancel of Our Lady of La Vang on this occasion; completion is expected in three years. Twenty state officials of Thua Thien Hue and Quang Tri provinces attended the event.

In October more than 1,000 followers and dignitaries of five religions joined in an inter-religious meeting held by the HCMC Archdiocese’s Pastoral Services. The gathering of representatives from Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Islam, Minh Ly Religion, and the Bahai Faith shared ideas about how to guide others to overcome hardship and misery, and called for more cooperation in charitable activities among different religious groups.

The construction of a new facility for the Vietnam Buddhist Academy in Ho Chi Minh City was launched on November 4. The new 57-acre institute in Binh Chanh District will provide undergraduate and master’s degree programs on Buddhism. Licensed in 1983 and currently located in Phu Nhuan District, the academy had trained 1,500 nuns and monks by the end of the year.

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

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senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CRA, 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.

The secretary of state, in meetings with government officials, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. The ambassador at large for international religious freedom visited the country in May and raised religious freedom issues with senior government officials and met with religious leaders of multiple faiths, both those recognized and not recognized by the Vietnamese government. She and other senior State Department officials raised religious freedom during their meetings with government officials and civil society representatives during the year.

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 that the government investigate alleged abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. Embassy officials called for the registration of churches around the country. 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. The ambassador met with religious leaders of both recognized and unrecognized faiths throughout the year, including the patriarch of the UBCV, the president of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North, and the archbishop of Hanoi. Consulate officers cooperated to provide information on visas for religious travel and study to representatives of all major religious communities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. 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

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Highlands. The embassy and consulate general held several religious freedom roundtables during the year to receive updates from both recognized and unrecognized Protestant churches on the status of religious freedom.