

Report on Violations of Religious Freedoms in Vinh Diocese – Nghe An - Vietnam

To: *Special Rapporteur of the United Nations on Freedoms of Religion or Belief*

Vinh diocese was established a long time ago (*on 3/27/1846 – Pope Gregory XVI signed a decree establishing this Diocese in the south zone of North-Vietnam and assigned the coadjutor-bishop of the western Diocese of North-Vietnam, Gauthier Ngo Gia Hau, to be its representative*). Since its inception, Vinh diocese had been the target of persistent persecution: arrests and killings of Catholic followers, church destructions even before it was established. It started under the Minh Mang dynasty (1821-1832) and lasted until now under the reign of Vietnamese Communist regime (Vinh diocese has 6 sanctified martyrs in its history).

Based on the statistics, as of 12/31/2006, Vinh diocese has the following geographical features:

Item name	Data	Remarks
- Area:	30.594,9 km ²	Encompassing 3 provinces: Nghệ An; Hà Tĩnh; Quảng Bình
- Catholic members:	474.143	
- Priests:	171	
- Nuns:	426	Nuns: women who practice religion in Catholic convents
- General students:	57	General students: those who study theology to become priests
- Preparatory students:	24	Preparatory students: those who prepare for exams to become priests
- Catechists:	7.635	Catechist: a person who teaches catechism to children
- Baptisms:	10.222	Baptism: initiation into Catholicism
-Wedding ceremonies:	4.707	Wedding ceremony: Catholic marriage proceeding

In order to survive, Vinh diocese Catholic members ought to persevere in keeping their religion. This is the reason why they are victims of religious persecution committed by the Vietnamese Communist government.

To prevent parishioners from exercising their religious freedom, the Vietnamese authorities created a slew of laws and rules to manipulate and hamper the activities of Vinh diocese.

- One typical example of this practice is Decree number 92/2012/NĐ-CP – a decree on the implementation of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief with the objective of limiting the religious freedoms of citizens. For example: Religious activities should be approved by the authorities before they can be conducted.

- The government intervened in the appointment of priests in the diocese. Those who wanted to be a priest must be first vetted by a provincial committee in order to be ordained.

- The government continuously harassed the believers when they exercised their rights to freedom of religion, especially in the case of Trai Gao – My Yen parish – Vinh diocese (Nghị Phương commune –

Nghi Loc district – Nghe An province – Vietnam): the authorities used tear gas against them, detained and imprisoned two of the parishioners when they gathered for a mass celebration (we will present the incident in detail later in the Report);

- The government made it difficult for establishing religious facilities especially in the case of Con Cuong parish (Trung Huong hamlet, Yen Khe commune, Con Cuong district, Nghe An province, Vietnam) where the authorities used the police, army and even thugs to vandalize religious establishments (we will present in detail this case later in the Report);
- The government repeatedly expropriated land and properties that belong to Catholic communities of Vinh diocese. Specific examples are the cases of: Tam Toa parish – Quang Binh province – Vietnam, My Loc parish – Ha Tinh – Vietnam, and Cau Ram parish – Vinh – Nghe An – Vietnam.
- The government deployed other methods to systematically prevent believers from exercising their religious freedom in Vinh diocese.
- The bishop of Vinh diocese had made an effort to establish a dialogue with the Vietnamese Communist authorities to resolve the above problems (violations of religious freedoms) but it seems that such attempt did not yield any success. The fact is that the authorities continued their systematic crackdown on religious freedoms in Vinh diocese (we will present in detail these violations of religious freedoms at Con Cuong and Trai Gao later in the Report);

I. Violation of Religious freedoms at Con Cuong, Yen Khe commune, Con Cuong district, Nghe An province, Vietnam

1- General information

In the period between November 2011 and June 2012, any time father Pham Ngoc Quang and father Nguyen Dinh Thuc came to Con Cuong to celebrate mass for parishioners, the authorities mobilized hundreds of individuals to surround the chapel and cause trouble, preventing them from performing mass. This situation occurred many times until 1 July 2012, when father Nguyen Dinh Thuc arrived for a mass with the parishioners. That day, the authorities gathered hundreds of public security agents; militia members; soldiers; mechanized police armed with guns, tear gas grenades, police bludgeons... and K9 dogs to savagely attack the priest and parishioners.

The above violation of religious freedom, although affecting a specific group of parishioners, had a severe impact on the whole community of 280 parishioners at Con Cuong locality, Quang Lang parish, Vinh diocese.

The victims of Con Cuong (Trung Huong village, Yen Khe commune, Cong Cuong district) belong to ethnic minorities Thai and regular Vietnamese.

It should be noted that based on item C, section 1 of article 16, chapter III of the Religious Act number 21/2004/PL-UBTVQH11 promulgated on 6/18/2004 by the National Assembly's Permanent Committee stipulates that: only those who are "registered for religious and apostolic activities are considered a religious organization". Father Pham Ngoc Quang who represented 241 parishioners (there were only 241 parishioners when Con Cuong locality first came into existence) had submitted application for registration to practice religion three times as per government procedures. However, all these applications were turned down (see part 1 of the Appendix I. Link: reference, sentence No. 4).

2- Identity of Persons Concerned (*to be updated*)

The following information is provided for each of the victims.

- Family name: Nguyễn; Middle name: Đình
- First name: Thực
- Religion: Catholic
- Place of residence:
- Date of birth:
- Gender: male

3- Information regarding the Alleged Violation

The parish Quan Lang belongs to Bot Da vicariate, Vinh diocese. It has 4 branches, *Hoc lau, Chinh yen, Quan Lang, Hoi Phuoc* and 2 localities associated directly to Quan Lang: Cay Chanh which has 175 believers and Con Cuong, 208 believers. Due to the long distance from these 2 localities to Quan Lang parish, it is quite a challenge for parishioners to attend masses and other religious activities. For that reason, the bishop made a deal with the local authorities to use Con Cuong as the pastoral center for both religious localities Con Cuong and Cay Chanh. In the meantime, father Pham Ngoc Quang (being a priest of Quan Lang parish) registered with the government three times for religious activities in Con Cuong. Mr. Pham The Tran, a parishioner in Con Cuong, donated to the Catholic Church a piece of land of 1000 m² in the area to erect a chapel. In April 2010, father Pham Ngoc Quang allowed the building of the chapel to be used for religious activities. On 24 September, 2011 bishop Paul Nguyen Thai Hop baptized 53 catechumens in this chapel. Subsequently, vicar Joseph Pham Ngoc Quang baptized another 43 churchgoers. After that, many families came to register for catechism course.

Con Cuong chapel, built in April 2010



Around June 2011, Pham The Tran who gave the land on which the chapel was built were called in many times by the local authorities for questioning and he was also the subject of constant harassment, which causes harms to his personal business. Besides, the local authorities also called in for questioning the new converts with intention to harass, threaten and deter them from participating in religious activities and practicing their religion (see Appendix I, supporting Link, item 2).

On 13 November 2011 at 2:00PM, while father Joseph Pham Ngoc Quang and father JB Nguyen Dinh Thuc were performing the mass in the chapel of Con Cuong (Trung Huong hamlet, Yen Khe commune, Con Cuong district), the authorities mobilized a group of 300 individuals to gather in front of the chapel. There, they used high power loud speakers to shout anti-Catholic slogans, sounded alarm sirens and beat drums to create deafening noises, insulted the priests and believers while throwing rocks at the chapel... with the purpose of interrupting the mass service. Nevertheless, the two priests continued the mass service as if nothing happened and advised the believers not to go out and respond to the attack but rather they should stay calm in spite of the circumstances (see item 1, part III of the Appendix).

The same situation occurred in the following 2 weeks; then on 30 November 2011 at 12:30 AM, two sisters Dinh Thi Bac and Nguyen Thi Minh were woken up by a homemade bomb which was thrown into the chapel, causing damages to the ceiling, windows and floor. The next day, the Nghe An authorities sent out the public security police agents and an investigation team to come and make inquiries about the explosion. They confirmed that it was an explosion of a bomb as they found the trigger left on the scene. However, there was no follow-up on this case; and the file of this case was subsequently shelved (see item 1, par I of App. A. 3).

After the bomb incident, everything seemed to calm down; and the priests and the believers returned to normal religious activities without being harassed anymore. But in June 2012, when father Joseph

Ngo Van Hau was assigned to replace father Joseph Pham Ngoc Quang in assuming responsibilities at the parish Quan Lang, things became volatile again.

On Sunday 3 June 2012, prayer service commemorating the Trinity, when father Joseph Ngo Van Hau arrived at the chapel to celebrate mass, a group of around 50 officials from various government levels (from Con Cuong district, Yen Khe commune, Trung Huong hamlet) led by Tran Van Phuc, president of Fatherland Front of Con Cuong was already there. This group was there to stop, harass, make noise, switch off sound system, pull and shuffle the announcer so that he could not read the Gospel text. All of these acts aimed to disrupt the offertory proceeding. Moreover, several traffic policemen were deployed to station at all access roads leading to the entrance of the chapel to block and make it difficult for churchgoers to attend mass. Despite all the harassment, father Joseph Ngo Van Hau continued the mass to the end.

The harassment continued in the following weeks when father JB Nguyen Dinh Thuc replaced father Joseph Ngo Van Hau in celebrating mass at Con Cuong.

On 24 June, 2012, the situation deteriorated when father JB Nguyen Dinh Thuc celebrated the mass commemorating the birthday of Saint Jean-Baptiste. The mass was scheduled to start at 3:00 PM, but at 2:00 PM the authorities sent in already 250 persons. They were divided in two groups: one group occupied rows of seats reserved for the churchgoers, while the remaining group stood in the court yard, trying to block the priest from entering the chapel to celebrate mass. At 2:30 PM, when father JB Nguyen Dinh Thuc arrived, he was intercepted by the government officials asking him to come to the police station for a questioning session which he firmly declined, on the ground that it was too late as the mass service was about to begin and there was no justification to delay it. After this exchange he went on to celebrate mass with parishioners. As retaliation, the government officials opened the chapel window close to the altar and aimed powerful loudspeakers set at high volume to overwhelm the mass service inside. The message broadcasted denounced the "wrongdoings" of the Bishop, priests and the parishioners. Also, gangs of youths shoved and hustled the parishioners, while others tried to damage the chapel's electricity generators and cut the connection wires but fortunately these plots were discovered and stopped in time by the churchgoers.

Believers who were on the way in encountered all kinds of obstructions: they were stopped, searched and questioned by the security agents with an attempt to threaten and create troubles to the mass attendees. At the end of the celebration, the president of Con Cuong Fatherland Front, Tran Van Phuc, asked father Nguyen Dinh Thuc not to celebrate mass at this chapel anymore. However, due to the necessity and duty to serve the Catholic community in the area, father Nguyen Dinh Thuc decided to continue to celebrate mass there (see item 4 part III of the Appendix).

On 1 July, 2012 at 11:50 AM, as it was known that father Nguyen Dinh Thuc will come to the chapel to celebrate mass, the authorities dispatched vehicles packed with public security agents, propaganda unit from Con Cuong cultural office, militia units and an undetermined number of thugs to the chapel entrance. As soon as they were there, units of security agents forced their way to the chapel by breaking the lock of the entrance, rushed in, attacked and subdued two nuns - Dinh Thi Bac and Ho Thi Hien - who were inside the chapel at the time. Witnessing the scene was Bay, a female Catholic. Discontented with what she saw, she asked the gangs not to harm the nuns, which prompted a security agent named Pham Van Tuyen to beat her brutally and without pity.



Statue of the Virgin Mary
smashed into small pieces

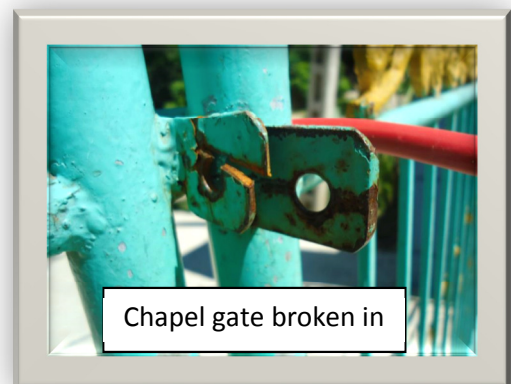
At 1:30 PM, a number of Con Cuong parishioners were already in the chapel and started to pray. At that moment, around 50 individuals from government-sponsored gang who were present at the spot yelled, screamed, and then pushed the parishioners out to the door. Other government units and thugs who had entered the chapel ridiculed the parishioners, and ransacked and smashed furniture, dishes and other assets in the chapel. Most serious of all was their smashing the statue of the Virgin Mary in the holy hall.

Around 2:00 PM, as soon as he stepped in the compound to prepare for mass, father Nguyen Dinh Thuc encountered the government officials and their collaborators who were waiting for him. The former requested him not to celebrate mass. Despite the pressure and threat against him, father Nguyen Dinh Thuc did not budge and decided to go on with the mass, as he firmly believed that it was the right of the parishioners to express their faith and practice their religion by celebrating mass. Realizing that they could not sway him, the government group jumped on him and beat him savagely. The parishioners tried to come to protect him but the government forces became more brutal than ever; they began to hit the parishioners, pounding them, men, women and children, without distinction. In the melee, Miss Maria Ngo Thi Thanh received a blow caused by a police portable loudspeaker on the head. As a result, she suffered a concussion to the skull, and was rushed to Hanoi hospital. At the end of the scuffle, as the government side could not overcome the parishioners and priest by force, the 41 members of the government force rushed in and took over the chapel; they locked the door so that the parishioners and their priest could not get in to celebrate the mass.

Father Nguyen Dinh Thuc and the parishioners performed the Sacrament of Christ in the courtyard of the chapel. At the same instant, the authorities mobilized more plainclothes security agents, mechanized police, unit 113 of investigative police armed with shield covers and bludgeons, and a number of fully armed soldiers from regiment 335 of the army. They were positioned around the perimeter of the chapel ready to intervene. They continuously threw rocks at the chapel and parishioners and priest inside, and tried to break all the windows of the chapel.



Father Nguyen Dinh Thuc
celebrate mass outside the chapel



Chapel gate broken in

During this time the parishes belonging to Bot Da vicariate got news of the government's assault against Con Cuong parish. Bells were tolled, and people from surrounding parishes rushed to Con Cuong locality to show solidarity. Although the government troops encircled and blocked access to the chapel, they could not stop the waves of incoming believers who peacefully succeeded to break through the blockade. Frightened by the large number of incoming believers, many government officials and thugs locked themselves in the chapel, while others outside did what they could to stop the flow of believers.

As the outdoor mass continued, two individuals from Thanh Chuong district, Nghe An province, threw rocks at the chapel. The believers attending mass quickly detained them. When questioned, they said that they were paid 500,000 VND (piasters) by the local authority each time for such act.

At 4:30 PM on the same day, after the mass ended, the government delegated Mr. Vi Van Kim, Vice-Chair of the People's Committee of Con Cuong district; Mr. Hoang Dinh Tan, Chief of District Public Security Office, Mr. Bang security agent of Nghe An province, to come and negotiate. Despite the threat from the authorities, the believers continued to stay and requested the authorities to release all those parishioners arrested during the earlier scuffle and to investigate and report on the police's attack against the chapel and parishioners.

After giving all kinds of explanation with the purpose of denying any responsibility in the incident, finally, Mr. Kim on behalf of the government asked the parishioners for forgiveness. The parishioners drafted the minutes of the conversation but the police did not stamp it with their "official stamp". The minutes mentioned that the authorities had ordered their personnel to come and harass, beat, smash and blaspheme statues and place of worship. These acts constituted wrongdoings and misconduct by the government, violated the rules of law and created division among the people .



Armed soldiers positioned in front of the chapel

At 3:30 AM on 2 July, 2012, calm and order returned to Con Cuong locality. After the sleepless night to assure safety for the lives of believers in Yen Khe commune and its neighborhood, the believers of other parishes began to withdraw, still worried and unsettled as they did not know for sure whether the government was willing to resolve the problem or not. As soon as they left the chapel by around 500 meters, a group of thugs chased Pham Van Hoan (of Hoi Phuoc religious group, hamlet 3 of Tuong Son, Anh Son) and hit him repeatedly with iron bars, causing him severe injuries and bleeding. His

motorcycle was smashed in front of the public security agents in uniform (see item 5, part I of the Appendix).

On 3 July, 2012, father JB Nguyen Dinh Thuc wrote a report of the 3 July, 2012 incident and sent it to the Bishop and all the Catholic members of Vinh diocese. In the report, he described in detail the facts pertaining to the incident. He said: “We, the faithful of Mighty God, saw through the herein reported incident just the beginning of a conspiracy of the Evil forces. We are prepared to carry on our shoulders the Holy Cross of Jesus Christ in the pursuit of peace, religious freedoms, and justice on this western land of Nghe An province. Please, Dear Monseigneur, fathers of all parishes, and all the faithful of Lord Jesus Christ, continue to pray for us”. (see item 1, part VI of the Appendix)

See below right pictures of the victims of Con Cuong incident

On 4 July, 2012, after receiving the report from father JB Nguyen Dinh Thuc, the Office of Bishop of Vinh diocese issued an announcement to all the Catholic members of Vinh diocese regarding Con Cuong incident. At the same time, the

Office also forwarded its official letter No. 25/12 VTTG to the People's Committees of Yen Khe commune, Con Cuong district, Nghe An province, denouncing the wrongdoings of the authorities at Con Cuong in particular, and in Nghe An province in general. In the letter, the Office affirmed the following points:



- The mass celebration in accordance with Catholic rite by the priest and parishioners in Yen Khe commune is legitimate and represents a fundamental right of citizens. It is also consistent with Vietnamese law and International Covenant on the Civil and Political Rights.
- The police repression at Con Cuong district was systematic and premeditated.
- Many state-run mass media in Nghe An had distorted the news and slandered the priests and parishioners.

The letter also emphasized that the Office of the Bishop and all the Catholic members of Vinh diocese strongly condemned the Vietnamese authorities for repressing the priests and believers, especially the desecration of holy statues and other sacred objects, hence undermining the faith of the whole Catholic Church (see item 2, part VI, chapter A of the Appendix).

On the other hand, Nghe An authorities decided on 4 July, 2012 to start prosecuting a number of Catholic believers for illegally detaining two individuals, creating public disturbances, resisting government officials on duty, and having intent to cause injury. The prosecuting order bears the signature of Mr. Nguyen Viet Hoa, Deputy-Chief of the Investigation Bureau of the provincial Police of Nghe An.

On 5 July 2012, the Investigation Bureau of the provincial Police of Nghe An summoned Mr. Pham Van Thang from Hung Son commune, Anh Son district and Mr. Nguyen Van Dai, hamlet 10, Tuong Son commune, Anh Son district, to come to the police station of Anh Son district for questioning. In the meantime, the authorities of Hung Son commune (residence of father JB Nguyen Dinh Thuc) also summoned those who hold offices with the Dong Lam parish to come to the People's Committee of the commune for questioning concerning the incident at Con Cuong. However, none of the summoned people showed up (see item 3, part II of the Appendix).

On 7 July, 2012, Nghe An authorities responded to the letter No. 25/12 VTTG from the Office of the Bishop of Vinh diocese. In the reply, the authorities kept on blaming the priest and parishioners for carrying out illegal religious activities and denied sending people to come and harass and repress the priests and believers. Rather, they attributed it to the action of the local residents of the area where the incident occurred. Also, the authorities claimed that the Office of the Bishop falsely accused the government and threatened with the following words: "We recommend the Office to order father Ngo Van Hau and father Nguyen Dinh Thuc to cease all activities at Mr. Pham The Tran's house (meaning the chapel of Con Cuong) to prevent any bad consequence that may happen in the future (see item 3, part VI. of the Appendix).

On 15 July, 2012, the Chair of the People's Committee of Nghe An province, Mr. Ho Duc Phuoc, sent a confidential letter to the Prime Minister of Vietnam. This letter described several incidents related to religious affairs, especially the occurrence at Con Cuong district, and asked for the support of the army units from Vietnam Military Zone 4 if the situation demands (see item 5, part III of the Appendix).

4- Appendices

I. Links:

1. Father Phạm Ngọc Quang applied for registering religious activities but it was rejected by the Authorities.

<http://giaophanvinh.net/modules.php?name=News&op=viewst&sid=7934>

2. Monseigneur Bishop corresponded with the Authorities about using Con Cuong Locality as a pastoral center.

<http://www.chuacuuthe.com/2011/12/gia%CC%81o-x%C6%B0%CC%81-nhan-ho%CC%80a-giao-ph%E1%BA%ADn-vinh-ke%CC%89-khu%CC%89ng-bo%CC%81-luon-tha%CC%89m-ba%CC%A3i/>

3. The chapel of Con Cuong attacked by homemade bomb.

<http://giaophanvinh.net/modules.php?name=News&op=viewst&sid=7934>

4. The government mobilized their personnels to come and harass Con Cuong parishioners on 24 June, 2012.

<http://www.nuvuongcongly.net/cong-ly/giao-di%E1%BB%83m-con-cuong-ngh%E1%BB%87-an-ti%E1%BA%BFp-t%E1%BB%A5c-b%E1%BB%8B-qu%E1%BA%A5y-pha-linh-m%E1%BB%A5c-va-giao-dan-b%E1%BB%8B-ngan-c%E1%BA%A3n-c%E1%BB%AD-hanh-thanh-l%E1%BB%85/>

5. The government repressed the priest and Con Cuong parishioners on 1 July, 2012.

http://www.nuvuongcongly.net/xa-hoi/binh-luan/quandoi_concuong/

6. Confidential letter from the People Committee of Nghe An to the Prime Minister of Vietnam.

http://www.nuvuongcongly.net/xa-hoi/phong-su/ammuu_csnghean/

II. Photos:

1. Photos taken on 24 June, 2012 (attached reference)
2. Photos taken on 1 July, 2012 (attached reference)
3. Summon letter addressing to Bot Da parishioners (attached reference)
4. Official letter from the Office of the Bishop of Vinh diocese (attached reference)
5. Confidential letter from the People's Committee of Nghe An to the Prime Minister of Vietnam (attached reference)

III. Videos:

1. The authorities surrounded and harassed the churchgoers at Con Cuong chapel on 13 November, 2011.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_uOmL6SmNQ

2. The authorities surrounded and harassed the churchgoers at Con Cuong chapel on 24 June, 2012.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r70N4V-YR7k>

3. Mr. Vi Văn Kim, Vice-Chair of People's Committee of Con Cuong district reading the report of the incident on 1 July, 2012 (Sound attached).

4. Father Nguyễn Đình Thục recounted in detail the incident at Con Cuong.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LSBzTKo3Kc>

VI. References:

1. Report of father Nguyễn Đình Thục on the incident at Con Cuong on 1 July, 2012.

<http://gpvinh.blogspot.com/2012/07/lm-nguyen-inh-thuc-tuong-trinh-su-viec.html>

2. Official letter # 25/12 VTTG from the Office of the Bishop of Vinh's diocese to the People's Committees of different levels of government.

<http://www.nuvuongcongly.net/cong-ly/van-th%C6%B0-c%E1%BB%A7a-tgm-gp-vinh-g%E1%BB%ADi-ubnd-t%E1%BB%89nh-ngh%E1%BB%87-an-v%E1%BB%81-s%E1%BB%B1-vi%E1%BB%87c-t%E1%BA%A1i-giao-di%E1%BB%83m-con-cuong/>

3. Responding letter of the People's Committee of Nghe An to letter # 25/12 VTTG

http://www.nghean.vn/wps/wcm/connect/web+content/portal_na/ttsk/xh/47fed8804bea1cc1aea3eeebc7068b0d