**PERSECUTION OF THE UNIFIED BUDDHIST CHURCH OF VIETNAM**

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), an umbrella organization representing many of the Theravada and Mahayana temples and congregations in the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), was established in January 1964 after several Buddhist groups met from late December 1963 to early January 1964. UBCV’s central office was located in An Quang Temple in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City).

After the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) invaded South Vietnam in April 1975, the Communist regime took over UBCV’s properties and institutions, including several temples, schools (including Van Hanh University) and orphanages. This caused several protests by Buddhists in a number of cities. In March 1977 the Executive Council of UBCV publicly denounced the persecution by the Communist regime and mass demonstrations of Buddhists took place in major cities. In response, the government arrested six members of the Council, including Most Ven. Thich Huyen Quang, Executive Vice President, and Most Ven. Thich Quang Do, Secretary General of the Executive Council. In April 1978, after 20 months in detention, they were tried in court and given suspended sentences.

**The torture and murder of Most Ven. Thich Thien Minh** (secular name Do Xuan Hang, 1921-1978):

Most Ven. Thich Thien Minh, a member of the Advisory Council of UBCV’s Institute for the Dissemination of Dharma, was arrested by Vietnam’s police in March 1978, following a nationwide brutal campaign against religious freedom. In October of the same year he was tortured to death while in police custody. The Vietnamese government has taken many measures in its attempt to make this heinous act appear less so in the hope of making the Vietnamese people, particularly Buddhists, forget as quickly as possible about it.

**Imprisonment of other high-profile Buddhist monks and UBCV members:**

**Most Ven. Thich Khong Tanh** (secular name Phan Ngoc An, born 1943), abbot of Lien Tri Temple in An Khanh Ward, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City (see the section on Expropriation of Lien Tri Buddhist Temple below), was imprisoned multiple times since 1976 for a total of more than 10 years.

**Ven. Thich Thien Minh** (secular name Huynh Van Ba, born in 1954), a Buddhist monk from Bac Lieu Province, South Vietnam, was jailed for protesting the government's crackdown on Buddhism. In 1976 - 2005 he was detained in different prisons where he was subjected to severe torture. Following his release, he was placed under house arrest. The government harassed him after he established an association of former religious and political prisoners. Nevertheless, he becomes a leading spokesperson in the advocacy for the humane treatment of prisoners. Thich Thien Minh's 2007 memoir about his prison experiences provides a rare and detailed look at the conditions in Vietnamese prisons and re-education camps.

**Most Ven. Thich Tue Sy** (secular name Pham Van Thuong, born in 1943)

A high- ranking Buddhist clergy member; he has been a lecturer in Philosophy at the Buddhist University of Van Hanh. He is currently the Secretary General of the United Buddhist Association in Vietnam. He was condemned to death in 1988 by the People’s Court of Ho Chi Minh City for “anti-governmental activities”. International pressure resulted in the government reducing his sentence to 20 years of hard labor. He was released early in September 1998.

**Ven. Thich Hue Dang** (secular name Nguyen Ngoc Dat, born 1943)   
Buddhist monk and UBCV member. On May 28, 1992, he was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment for writings about Buddhism and democratic reform.

Seeing that it could not easily control UBCV, in 1980 the Communist government changed its approach: it would create a new Buddhist church under the Communist Party’s control and then coerce UBCV members to join the party-controlled church. First, the government-appointed members of a new council established by the Communist government, the Unification Council. Next, this council was tasked with calling on monks to hold a meeting to unify all Buddhist organizations throughout the country. Most Ven.(s) Huyen Quang and Quang Do opposed the call for the meeting by the Unification Council. In November 1981, a Buddhist Congress was held with delegates selected by the government; subsequently, the Vietnam Buddhist Church (VBC) came into existence. VBC, founded by the government, is the sole Buddhist organization recognized by Communist Vietnam. It is also affiliated with the Fatherland Front, an appendage of the Vietnamese Communist Party. A number of members of UBCV refused to recognize VBC’s authority. To ensure that VBC encompasses all Buddhists in Vietnam, the government refuses to recognize and began to persecute those congregations and monks choosing to remain with the banned UBCV or those deciding not to join either VBC or UBCV.

In April 1982 the government sent Ven. Huyen Quang, Ven. Quang Do and 4 others into internal exile for their opposition to VBC. In July 1982 the security police took over and closed An Quang Temple, the main office of UBCV. In October 1991 the Acting Supreme Patriarch of UBCV, Thich Don Hau, sent a letter to overseas Buddhists calling on disparate groups to reunite under UBCV’s 1964 charter. Most Ven. Thich Don Hau passed away in April 1992 after leaving a will and testament naming Thich Huyen Quang as his successor.

Returning from internal exile in June 1992, Ven. Huyen Quang decried the government’s establishment of the VBC and called on the government to return confiscated properties to UBCV and allow UBCV to resume its functions. Large protests occurred in Hue and Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province. On May 21 and May 24, 1993, the Buddhist congregation of Thien Mu Temple in Hue organized a large protest, during which a lay Buddhist immolated himself to urge others to protect the Buddhist faith. Security police arrested six monks of the temple, including Abbot Thich Tri Tuu, and about 50 lay Buddhists. Later, they arrested and interrogated 3 more monks-Thich Hai Tang, Thich Hai Chanh and Thich Hai Thinh- and other Buddhists, including nuns and laypersons. Put on trial in November 1993, the monks received prison sentences ranging from 3 to 4 years. Four laypersons received prison sentences ranging from 6 to 24 months. Furthermore, in July 1993 the abbot of Son Linh Temple, Ven. Thich Hanh Duc, and his monks (in Baria-Vung Tau Province) were arrested because they resisted the local government’s eviction order. This expropriation of a UBCV temple was supported by the local Fatherland Front, the Communist Party’s appendage that always works hand-in-hand with the Communist government. In 1994 Abbot Thich Hanh Duc received a 3-year prison sentence.

In 1994 UBCV resumed its social assistance work that had been forbidden under Communist rule through engaging in flood relief efforts in the Mekong Delta. In response, the government arrested five Buddhists and detained Most Ven. Huyen Quang and Quang Do in December 1994 and January 1995, respectively. In August 1994 several Buddhist protests were held in Ho Chi Minh City. In October 1994 the government detained Ven. Thich Giac Nguyen of Long An Temple in Tra Vinh Province. In October 1994, Most Ven. Thich Khong Tanh of Lien Tri Temple in Thu Thiem, Ho Chi Minh City, who was also appointed by UBCV to be in charge of the flood relief task, met with the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UNWGAD) on their official visit to Vietnam. Thich Khong Tanh delivered to UNWGAD a report on the government’s violation of human rights and religious freedom and letters from Huyen Quang and Quang Do calling on the UN to press Vietnam to release religious prisoners. In November 1994 the government arrested Thich Khong Tanh and four Buddhists, charging them with formulating a plan for the relief effort in spite of the government’s ban on social assistance activities by un-registered religious organizations. In the same month security police forced their way into Ven. Thich Nguyen Ly’s temple in District 8 of Ho Chi Minh City and seized the supplies intended for the relief effort.

On October 1, 2003, during a special general assembly of UBCV members held at Nguyen Thieu Monastery, Binh Dinh Province, UBCV decided to delegate to its overseas members the task of planning for and holding a general assembly outside of Vietnam. The first such general assembly was held at Quang Duc Monastery in Melbourne, Australia on October 10-12, 2003. The delegates at this assembly elected Most Ven. Huyen Quang as the fourth Supreme Patriarch of UCBV. Unfortunately, his health began to deteriorate in June 2006, requiring hospitalization more than once, and he passed away on July 5, 2008 at Nguyen Thieu Monastery.

**Isolation and Detention of Senior UBCV Leaders**:

The government sent Most Ven. Huyen Quang and Quang Do into internal exile for 10 years in remote areas of Quang Ngai and Thai Binh Provinces respectively; and blocked any contact with other Buddhists. Huyen Quang was initially exiled to, and isolated at Hoi Phuoc Temple in Quang Ngai before being transferred to a small village temple in a mountainous area where he was subjected to tight police surveillance.

Back from internal exile in 1992, Quang Do returned to his former residence in Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City. In August 1994 he renewed the call for the restoration of UBCV; and sent a letter to the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party to transmit a critique of the government’s policy toward Buddhism. On October 14, 1994 he sent a letter to UBCV members reminding them of the most Ven. Huyen Quang’s wishes to set up committees of representatives and to resume normal activities. In the letter he also requested all temples to hang signs indicating their affiliation with UBCV. Arrested in January 1995, he was charged with “inciting disturbance”, tried, and sentenced in August 1995 to 5 years in prison, followed by 5 years of house arrest. However, he was released early in September 1998 and placed under house arrest at Thanh Minh Zen Monastery. In 1999 he was elected the Head of the Institute for Dissemination of Dharma of UBCV.

In 2008, after the death of Most Ven. Huyen Quang, Most Ven. Quang Do was elected the Fifth Supreme Patriarch ofUBCV; however, he did not take office until November of 2011, after the 9th general assembly of overseas UBCV members was held in Dieu Ngu temple, Westminster, California, USA. On September 15, 2018, the abbot of Thanh Minh Monastery requested Most Ven. Quang Do to find shelter elsewhere after the monastery and its congregation endured years of police surveillance and restrictions (because Quang Do lived there). After moving out, he temporarily resided at different locations in Ho Chi Minh City until October 5. Under pressure from the government, he left for his hometown temple in Tien Hai, Thai Binh Province. Before leaving the city he sent a message to all monks, nuns and lay Buddhists in Vietnam and overseas asking them to set aside past differences and come together to help Buddhism truly flourish in both Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese communities. After 20 years of confinement in Ho Chi Minh City and less than a month in Thai Binh Province, he escaped from house arrest and sought refuge in Tu Hieu Temple in Ho Chi Minh City’s District 8.

Other senior UBCV leaders or abbots of major temples were arrested, threatened, isolated, detained, or imprisoned. The government seized their temples and other church properties or forced them to cede to VBC, which was supported by government.The Vietnamese government’s relentless persecution of independent and UBCV temples (and their congregations) was decried by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in March 2014 as follows: “Freedom of religion is very poor in Vietnam. They used specialized religious police force and vague national security laws to suppress the ability to worship”. So far, the Communist Party has shown no willingness to change its policy.

**Destruction of Property and Harassment of the Congregation of Dat Quang Temple in Bau Lam Commune, Xuyen Moc District, Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province**

Ven. Thich Vinh Phuoc (legal, non-religious name: Phuong Huu Pham)’s attempt to build a wooden structure to alleviate the acute shortage of living space for the temple’s monks met with several governmental roadblocks. In February 2014, after building a concrete foundation for a temporary wooden structure, he had lumber delivered to the site. The government seized all the lumber although regulations did not require a construction permit for such a temporary structure. On October 6, 2015, a police force accompanied the heavy equipment and crew sent by the local government to remove the foundation. This security force blocked all access to the temple and arrested several members of the congregation who had joined the monks in a non-violent meditation session on the foundation. To this day, the government continues to exert pressure on the temple because the abbot chose to remain independent from VBC.

It should be noted that in January 2018 an appeals court rejected the VBC claim to this temple:

“It follows that VBC of Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, being the organization with oversight over the issues related to religious activities, is not entitled to litigate to claim Dat Quang Temple, and the lower court did not act as the law prescribes when taking on this case and agreeing with all the claims made by the Vietnam Buddhist Church (VBC) of Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu against Messrs. Phương, Chí, Phước and Phú.

Considering all the above, the Appeals Judges Council agrees with the view of the representative of the Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu Procuracy and accepts partially Mr. Phương’s appeal, overturns the entire lower court’s judgment, and stops further litigation.”

Despite the court’s decision, the local police continued to harass Dat Quang temple to make it join VBC or give up its claim to be a religious establishment.

**Expropriation of Lien Tri Temple in An Khanh Ward, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City**

Abbot Thich Khong Tanh (legal, non-religious name: An Ngoc Phan), owner of Lien Tri Temple, considered the government’s compensation offer at approximately 250 thousand U.S. dollars totally inadequate for buying land and building a replacement temple close enough to serve the current congregation. The government had imprisoned him on a number of occasions for a total of 20 years between 1976 and 2000, primarily for his refusal to join VBC.

On May 13, 2015, the government deposited, without the abbot’s approval, 784 million VN$ (35 thousand U.S. dollars) into his bank account at Cong Thuong Bank, and offered a piece of land in Cat Lai Ward, 12 km from Lien Tri Temple. Ven. Thich Khong Tanh did not accept the offer. On May 30, 2015 the Interfaith Council in Vietnam protested the government decision.

On September 8, 2016, a police force accompanied the heavy equipment and crew sent by the government, and the temple was razed. Mr. Ed Royce, a Member of the U.S. Congress, acknowledged that fact.

While Lien Tri Temple (affiliated with UBCV) was destroyed, Hue Nghiem Temple, associated with VBC, flourishes in the same part of Ho Chi Minh City.

**Expropriation of An Cu Temple in Son Tra District, Danang City**

In response to the September 24, 2018 decision by the local government to seize the land for the An Cu 4 Residential Project (while offering to compensate at less than 2% of fair market value), Abbot Thich Thien Phuoc (legal, non-religious name: Coi Van Huynh), the owner of An Cu Temple, proposed 2 alternatives to enable the replacement temple to continue to serve the existing congregation:

* Compensation in the form of an equivalent land parcel (317.7 m2) in a nearby location, on which the government would build a temple of comparable size and quality before turning it over to the abbot, or
* Compensation in the form of an equivalent land parcel (317.7 m2) in a nearby location coupled with a land use permit and a permit to construct the replacement temple (in which case the abbot would need to raise funds for the design and construction of the temple).

Without responding, the government razed the temple on November 9, 2018.

The taking of An Cu Temple’s land conveniently served another policy objective of the central government, eradicating the remnants of the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

**Recent Harassment Incidents in Central and Southern Vietnam:**

1. Ven. Thich Duc Minh, abbot of **Thien Lam Temple, Town of Cai Lay, Tien Giang Province**, reported on February 20, 2019 that the monks affiliated with VBC were spreading rumors to defame him such that some out-of-town charitable groups stopped donating food and other necessities to the needy of the congregation of this 100-years old temple. The government targeted the abbot because he resisted its demand for the temple’s land. Recently, Judge Phan Thanh Son of the People’s Court of Cai Lay warned him that the government was about to ask him to voluntarily find another location to erect a temple before it forcibly seizes the land of the current temple.
2. Monk Thich Duc Long (secular name: Pham Tran Cong Trinh) of **Lien Tri II Temple, Block 3, Trung Hoa Hamlet, Trung Lap Ha Commune, Cu Chi District, Ho Chi Minh City,** reported that the local government had started harassing him and the congregation. On January 10, 2019 a government official asked him to stop using a microphone when conducting praying services at his temple. In that evening, thugs threw firecrackers into the sitting room of the temple.
3. **Giac Minh Temple in Binh Thien Ward, Hai Chau** **District, Danang City:** On January 12, 2019 a police group (uniformed and plainclothes officers and thugs) harassed the 81-years old abbot and Nun Dong Hieu by knocking loudly on the temple door at night while preventing local Buddhists from entering the temple to support the victims.
4. **Son Linh Temple in the Town of Pleikan, Ngoc Hoi District, Kontum Province**: The local government demolished the temple on January 11, 2019 when Abbot Thich Dong Quang was in Hue City for cancer treatment. The government’s pretext- the temple sits on agricultural land - is not supportable because nearby houses and shops have not been targeted like the temple although their land is also agricultural.