

Vietnamese Government must cease intimidation and violence against its citizens for taking part in UN-proclaimed commemorating day

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We are gravely alarmed by the ongoing violence campaign by Vietnamese authorities against not only individuals who observed the August 22 International Day commemorating victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief, but also their family members.

On September 10, the police in Ba Ria – Vung Tau Province targeted family members of Mr. Tran Van Thuong, a Buddhist lay leader. At 3am, they apprehended his son Tran Van Khuong at the latter's workplace without an arrest warrant and took him to the Xuyen Moc Police Station. When Khuong's wife, parents and older sibling, Tran Van Phe, and his wife arrived at the police station with Khuong's 19-months old daughter, Phe's 10-months old son and two female relatives, the police detained them all. Thuong and Phe were taken to a separate room and beaten by the police. A friend of the family who came to the police station to inquire about their safety was also detained. They were all released in the late evening the same day. In 2010, the government destroyed Phap Bien Pagoda, which Mr. Thuong built with his family's fund.

On August 27, the police in Tien Giang Province abducted a Cao Dai lay leader on the street and at the same time apprehended his college-age son at the latter's workplace. Held separately, father and son were subjected to interrogation and threats. The father was held for 11 hours without food. The police took his mobile phones and illegally downloaded its contents. The son was released close the midnight. Before release, both were ordered, under threat of physical harm, to sign pledges not to report their abduction.

On the same day, the police in Tien Giang Province tricked the parents of female Cao Dai adherent to come to the police station for confirmation that they were not involved in a traffic accident. At the police station, the police took their mobile phone, illegally captured its content, and held them for hours for questioning. Before being released, they were ordered sign a pre-written pledge to stop their daughter's advocacy for religious freedom including observing the international commemorating day. They were instructed not to report their arbitrary detention.

On August 22, the police in Kontum Province came to block Buddhist monk Thich Dong Quang from observing the UN-proclaimed commemorating day; they confiscated the commemorating banner and all the Buddhist standards displayed on the premise of this monk's private residence. The following day, the police returned to take him to a COVID-19 quarantine facility with no valid justification. As the monk adamantly resisted, the police left but promised to come back and get him. "No one can save you, not the US embassy, not the UN, not the central government in Ha Noi," they said. Fearing for his personal safety, Ven. Thich Dong Quang has sought temporary refuge at a pagoda in another province. In January 2019, the police destroyed his Son Linh pagoda (see: <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Vietnam.pdf>)

On August 20, at about 6am, the police in Dak Lak Province came to the Piôr 2 Village and took six adherents of the International Degar Church to the police station for interrogation; these victims had observed the international commemorating day on August 19 to avoid police interference. The police threatened them with imprisonment, took over the Facebook account of one of them, and later posted messages denying police interference and threats.

On August 16, the police in Gia Lai Province came to the home of Y Phô Êban, Pastor of Good News Mission Church of Cuê Village. They interrogated him about his plan to observe the international day. Before leaving, they threatened to kill him if he reported the interference and smashed his tablet make sure that there was no evidence of their visit. In the following days, government-controlled web pages carried messages smearing the pastor and other members of his church.

On May 28, 2019, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution A/RES/73/296 proclaiming August 22 International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. On the occasion of this year's observance, UN human rights experts expressed support for the victims: "On this International Day commemorating victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief, we stand in solidarity with the victims and survivors."¹

"Ironically, for commemorating victims, many Vietnamese citizens have themselves become victims of harassment, intimidation and outright violence by the police," said Dr. Nguyen Dinh Thang, CEO & President of BPSOS.

So far BPSOS has documented nine incidents of interference, harassment, threats or violence against Vietnamese citizens who heeded the UN's call to commemorate victims of violence based on religion or belief. In most instances the police declared that such observance would violate Vietnam's law.

"We ask that UN mandate holders and governments to express strong objection to the Vietnamese government over what appears to be an ongoing reprisal campaign against citizens who supported UN UN Resolution A/RES/73/296," said Dr. Thang.

¹ The Experts: Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Mr. Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Ms. Elizabeth Broderick (Chair), Ms. Melissa Upreti (Vice Chair), Ms. Alda Facio, Ms. Meskerem Geset Techane, Ms. Ivana Radačić, Working Group on discrimination against women and girls; Ms. Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Ms. E. Tendayi Achiume, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; Ms. Agnes Callamard, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and Mr. Victor Madrigal-Borloz, Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.



Mr. Tran Van Thuong (first from right) and family members and fellow Buddhists observing international commemorating day in a makeshift place of worship, August 22, 2020



Police officers confiscating the commemorating banner and religious standards at the private residence of Ven. Thich Dong Quang, August 22, 2020



Police officer Nguyen Anh Tuan (left), who threatened Pastor Y Phô Êban (right) and smashed the latter's tablet, August 16, 2020