



**From:** Boat People SOS and ADF International  
**To:** Office of International Religious Freedom—U.S. Department of State  
**Date:** Updated February 29, 2024  
**Re:** **Recent Improvements for “Stateless” Hmong Christian Communities and Steps Forward**

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## 1. Summary

Towards the end of 2023, Vietnamese State Television (People’s TV) ran a series of programs focusing on Hmong communities in Subdivision 179 in Lam Dong Province. These communities are composed of Hmong Christians who have faced for years difficulties accessing basic services because of their lack of government-provided IDs, caused by discrimination based on their ethnoreligious backgrounds. However, these television programs appear to have announced a significant change in government policy towards the communities at the national level, showing a more sympathetic viewpoint and indicating a desire to grant them IDs. Furthermore, the most recent program mentioned issuing citizenship ID cards to a number of other subdivisions with Hmong Christians in them in Lam Dong Province, as well as thousands of others in Dak Nong and Dak Lak Provinces. While there are still issues at the local level in obtaining ID cards, this series of events appears to indicate a major change in national policy towards undocumented Hmong Christian communities. If these policies are genuinely implemented and effectuated at the local level, the improvement would show significant progress for Vietnam in its religious freedom conditions after years of deterioration. We recommend that the U.S. take all measures to encourage Vietnam to continue along this path and see that this policy-shift is implemented fully at the local level in every province featuring undocumented Hmong and Montagnard Christians.

## 2. Background and Recent Positive Developments

It is estimated that there are at least 10,000 stateless<sup>1</sup> Christians in Vietnam. Members of the Hmong and Montagnard ethnic groups, these Protestant Christians are denied the basic documents of citizenship, referred to as “household registration,” because they belong to churches that are not controlled by the government and/or because the authorities regard their faith as a threat to the established order.<sup>2</sup> Household registration is required for nearly all the necessary legal actions that arise in the normal course of life. In particular, household registration is required to obtain state identification cards which are the main proof of Vietnamese citizenship and the vehicle by which an individual can access rights and benefits provided by the state.<sup>3</sup> Denying household registration to Christians therefore renders them functionally stateless.

Household registration is also required for, among other things, obtaining passports; certificates of birth, death, or marriage; owning property; securing bank loans, employment, and housing; adopting children; purchasing insurance; and having access to basic services such as health care and education.

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<sup>1</sup> These individuals do not technically qualify as “stateless” according to the definition in Article 1 of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons because the government still considers them to be Vietnamese nationals. (Article 1 of the Convention states: “For the purpose of this Convention, the term ‘stateless person’ means a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law”.) However, as they have been stripped of most of their civil, political, economic, and social rights, the term “stateless” accurately describes their de facto status.

<sup>2</sup> Vietnam does not officially discriminate against Protestant Christians. Christians who belong to churches that have “registered” with the State are generally able to practice their religion under the close and constant supervision of the government’s Committee on Religious Affairs. However, many Protestant churches are not willing or able to “register” for various reasons, including: (1) doctrine incompatible with the Committee on Religious Affairs’ requirements, (2) denial of registration despite meeting all requirements, (3) indefinite delay in approving qualified applications. Even “registered” churches in the northwestern mountains and the Central Highlands often face government persecution.

<sup>3</sup> Birth certificates can also be used to prove nationality; however, children of parents without household registration documents are often not issued birth certificates.

Authorities have frequently made clear that the Christian faith of Hmong and Montagnard Christians is the precise reason for their statelessness. Their Christian denominations are unrecognized by the government and viewed as threatening and unduly “American.” In many instances, authorities have assured Christians that household registration would be issued if they were to renounce their faith. For example, in 2008, the Provincial Government of the Muong Nhe District agreed to issue household registration cards to Christian families who agreed to have “no religion” listed on their documents. Those who requested to identify as Protestant were categorically denied registration.

Recent developments indicate that there may be a major shift occurring regarding these “stateless” communities at the national level.

Subdivision 179 in Dam Rong District, Lam Dong Province, is one small community of undocumented Hmong Christians that has been a focus of BPSOS and ADF International advocacy for years. In 2020, there was an improvement in their situation when local authorities allocated \$3.3 million in funding for undocumented Hmong Christian households there to receive improved facilities, including a clinic and community center.<sup>4</sup>

In October 2023, People’s TV in Vietnam aired a documentary program titled, “Unnamed Village of Migrants.”<sup>5</sup> The program portrayed the Hmong’s situation sympathetically and noted the national government’s plans to provide the community of roughly 700 with IDs. In December 2023, a follow-up program continued on the same theme for Subdivision 179, noting that IDs still had yet to be provided and that IDs should be provided not just to Subdivision 179, but to other subdivisions in Lam Dong Province, as well as for the Hmong in Dak Nong and Dak Lak Provinces.<sup>6</sup> This video shows a banner in Subdivision 179 announcing that further development for the community was to begin.

As alluded to in the programming, some local residents of Subdivision 179 have reported to BPSOS that they are still having difficulty with local officials providing access to citizenship ID cards.

### **3. Recommendations**

Given the repeated focus on providing Hmong residents of Subdivision 179 access to ID cards and greater community support in Vietnamese State Television, as well as the resumption of development projects, we view the shift as a potentially major policy change at the national level. The public media also indicates a willingness and desire to see access to IDs for Hmong communities spread to other provinces, encompassing thousands. Difficulties appear to still remain with implementation at the local level, but the resumption of development in December 2023 indicates that local officials can be persuaded to overcome their prejudices. As Vietnam announced a new electronic ID system for citizens in February 2024, Hmong and Montagnard communities should be included in the new ID system.

BPSOS and ADF International would thus recommend significant diplomatic and public messaging praising these developments and encouraging both their spread and local implementation for both Hmong and Montagnard communities. The upcoming International Religious Freedom Summit would be a high-profile event at which to mention these positive developments and encourage them. We would also suggest including messaging in diplomatic engagement noting that widespread and measurable improvements to access to IDs on-the-ground for Hmong and Montagnard communities would be viewed as significant progress in improving Vietnam’s religious freedom conditions after years of deterioration. Local visits from embassy officials would help in this effort. Last, we would suggest working with foreign embassies that have good track records on encouraging religious freedom developments within Vietnam, such as Germany, to follow similar diplomatic strategies, so that the coordinated, positive diplomatic pressure would encourage genuine and significant improvements.

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<sup>4</sup> James W. Carr and Rep. Glenn Grothman (R-Wis.), “Hope and fears for religious freedom in Vietnam,” *The Hill* (Aug. 20, 2020), <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/religious-rights/512929-hopes-and-fears-for-religious-freedom-in-vietnam/>

<sup>5</sup> Viewable at <https://youtu.be/9-lzKyQKGkw?si=R9NQ07T9XV4Onp7>.

<sup>6</sup> Viewable at <https://nhandantv.vn/2015-khat-vong-tay-nguyen-di-dan-tu-do-bai-toan-can-loi-giai-som-d240309.htm>.