



ALTERNATIVE REPORT  
to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities  
for its Review of Vietnam on 6 – 7 March 2025

Jointly prepared by:  
Boat People SOS and Advocates for Faith & Justice in Vietnam



**Boat People SOS (BPSOS)**, co-founded in 1980 by Vietnamese refugees in the United States and Vietnamese boat people in Thailand, has for the past four decades assisted refugees fleeing persecution in Vietnam and in other countries (Cambodia, China, Pakistan, etc.). The organization has a long track record combatting human trafficking and promoting religious freedom in Southeast Asia. BPSOS has supported scores of religious and indigenous communities in Vietnam in developing their capacity to protect their own civic space.



**Advocates for Faith & Justice in Vietnam**, founded by Vietnamese Catholics, alerts the international community to the acts of violence targeting religious communities as the result of government policies of hatred and discrimination.

## SUMMARY

1. This joint submission is compiled based on information provided by:
  - Boat People SOS (BPSOS)
  - Advocates for Faith & Justice in Vietnam (AFJVN)
  
2. This joint submission addresses the following articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):
  - Article 5: Equality and non-discrimination
  - Article 9: Accessibility
  - Article 14: Liberty and security of person
  - Article 15: Freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment
  
  - Article 21: Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information
  
  - Article 25: Health
  
  - Article 28: Adequate standard of living and social protection
  
  - Article 29: Participation in public and political life
  
  - Article 30: Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

In this report we focus on three populations of persons with disabilities: (1) disabled veterans of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), (2) torture survivors, and (3) victims of human trafficking.

## **Disabled ARVN Veterans**

According to our estimate, there were at least one hundred thousand disabled ARVN veterans of the at the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975. These former US allies are victims of severe discrimination and, with few exceptions, have been denied access to disability services, including those funded by foreign governments including the US government via USAID. Many of them eke out a living by begging or selling lottery tickets in the street. Fifty years after the end of the war, the communist government continues to mistreat them for fighting on the wrong side.

Practically none of them, despite their eligibility, has received assistance from government-funded service providers, including those funded by the US or other foreign governments. To fill this gap, hundreds of charity groups/organizations among the Vietnamese diaspora have for the past three decades discreetly offered financial assistance to about 30,000 of these disabled veterans. Disabled ARVN veterans are threatened and harassed for having received assistance from US-based organizations; some local authorities reportedly even took away a portion or all of the assistance they received.

Some religious organizations in Vietnam have in small ways tried to help the South Vietnamese disabled veterans, at the risk of government retaliation.

Lien Tri Buddhist Temple: Located in Thu Thiem, District 2, Hochiminh City (HCMC), Lien Tri Buddhist Temple was established and built in 1956. With donations from the Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. and in France, its abbot, the Most Ven. Thich Khong Tanh, initiated the first ever sustained effort to provide relief to hundreds of disabled ARVN veterans. Facing intensifying harassment by the local authorities,<sup>1</sup> in 2013, The Most Venerable Thich Khong Tanh asked a number of Redemptorist Priest to take over this project. Starting in 2014, the local authorities blocked all activities at Lien Tri Buddhist Temple and, on 8 September, 2016, demolished it despite condemnation by the international community.<sup>2</sup>

Redemptorist Church in HCMC: Located in District 3 of HCMC, this church the Congregation of Most Holy Redeemer took over the project from Lien Tri Buddhist Temple and named it “Together we walk till the end of life,”<sup>3</sup> providing a number of services to the disabled ARVN veterans with the ultimate purpose of restoring their human dignity:

1. Annual health insurance costs
2. Prosthetic limbs
3. General health check-ups to screen for diseases

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<sup>1</sup> “Authorities in Vietnam stop unsanctioned Buddhist monks from distributing food to veterans”, RFA, 6 Aug 2012, available at:

<https://web.archive.archive.unhcr.org/20230527223844/https://www.refworld.org/docid/50291519c.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Buddhist monk loses fight with Vietnamese government”, The San Diego Union-Tribune, 14 Sep 2016, available at: <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2016/09/14/buddhist-monk-loses-fight-with-vietnamese-government/>

<sup>3</sup> “Hoạt động tri ân thương phế binh VNCH tại Sài Gòn” (Activities to honor disabled veterans of ARVN in Sai Gon), RFA, 30 Dec 2016, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/news/reportfromvn/south-vn-wounded-warriors-meet-in-saigon-12302016122424.html>

4. Funeral costs for the deceased
5. Scholarship support for the disabled's children and grandchildren
6. Gifts and money during Tet
7. Accommodation and rent
8. House repair and construction of new homes (similarly to Habitat for Humanity)
9. Year-end celebration with food and musical and social activities

The police routinely disrupted these activities and threatened participating disabled ARVN veterans, prohibiting them from contacting the Redemptorist Priests. Local authorities forced volunteers to sign pledges to no longer support the project. In 2017, the police abducted Mr. Nguyen Bac Truyen, the project's Coordinator, and sentenced him to 11 years in prison on trumped up charges.<sup>4</sup>

Under government pressure, in December 2024 the Redemptorist Priests announced the project's complete closure.

Loc Hung Vegetable Garden: Located in Ward 6, Tan Binh District, HCMC, this tight-knit Catholic community of some one thousand residents is part of the Loc Hung Parish. Most families in this community earned their living by growing vegetables that they sold at the local markets. On January 4, 2019 hundreds of police officers escorted a large contingent of demolition workers. Using bulldozers, they demolished most of the homes, including those built prior to 2018. On January 8, they returned to finish off the demolition – all 127 homes in the community were destroyed. For many years, this community partnered with Redemptorist priests to offer shelter to 18 disabled ARVN veterans. The government's land grab made them homeless. The government did not offer them any assistance, support or replacement residence.<sup>5</sup>

Case in point: Mr. TVD in Tuy An District, Phu Yen Province, was injured in his right leg and became blind in battle in Summer 1972. He suffered a stroke in 2020; his wife passed away in 2011. He lived with his two sons and one daughter. In 2012, he applied for disability assistance from the government but did not get any response. The only assistance he received was from his fellow followers of the Cao Dai Religion.

## **Torture Survivors**

Another disability population consists of victims of torture, including survivors of “re-education” camps. There is a large body of literature documenting the high prevalence of psychiatric symptoms among Vietnamese refugees who resettled to this country under the Humanitarian Operation (HO) program. Established in 1989, this program has resettled to the U.S. some 150,000 “re-education camp” survivors and family members directly from Vietnam.

Re-education camps are essentially a mix of Soviet-styled forced labor camps and China-styled laogai camps. Most re-education detainees were subjected to severe forms of torture over a long period of time.<sup>6</sup> According to a study by respected scholars in France and in the United States,

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/nguyen-bac-truyen>

<sup>5</sup> “Loc Hung Vegetable Garden: A Catholic community under siege,” BPSOS, 31 Jan 2019, available at: <https://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Loc-Hung-Vegetables-Garden-Summary-01-31-19.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Winter pain reminder of the hell of Communist re-education camps, NZCatholic, 30 Oct 2023, available at: <https://nzcatholic.org.nz/2023/10/30/winter-pain-reminder-of-the-hell-of-communist-re-education-camps/>

some 60,000 of “re-education camp” detainees were summarily executed or died of starvation, diseases, or exhaustion in “re-education”.<sup>7</sup> A five-year study conducted jointly by the Indochinese Psychiatry Clinic (IPC) of the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and Harvard Medical School found a prevalence of 90% for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 49% for major depression among “re-education camp” survivors.<sup>8</sup> In a subsequent study, the same research team found high prevalence of traumatic head injury among these survivors.<sup>9</sup>

The use of torture continues to be prevalent in Vietnam. We have documented the use of torture by the police against peaceful demonstrators in 2018.<sup>10</sup> We have also documented the frequent use of torture in Vietnam’s police stations, detention centers, and prisons.<sup>11 12 13</sup>

Focus group studies conducted by BPSOS have identified shocking types of torture these refugees had been exposed to. They include physical torture (e.g. beatings; being shackled or hung from the ceiling for days; forced labor; near suffocation; electric shocks); psychological torture (forced to witness others being tortured, raped, committing suicide, or being executed; subjected to mock execution, humiliation, verbal abuses, and death threats; forced to witness friends and family members being killed and mutilated); social torture (complete isolation, deprivation of news from outside, no communication with family for years); sensory deprivation (deprived of sound and light); forced betrayal of their own principles (e.g., forced to give information resulting in harm to others or to defy religious or cultural customs); sexual torture (rape, forced nudity during torture, forced masturbation, verbal sexual humiliation, torture of sexual organs); sleep and nutritional deprivation (forced to eat rotten food, nonfood materials, or food mixed with excrement).<sup>14</sup>

The sequelae of torture are profound. Survivors and family members have reported severe depression, suicidal ideation, PTSD, major depression, anxiety, fear, psychotic symptoms, difficulty trusting, disturbances in interpersonal relationships, shame, guilt, and uncontrollable anger. Many have great difficulty learning a new language because of memory disturbances and difficulty concentrating. Torture survivors receiving treatment have reported physiological problems resulting from torture and trauma, including neurological impairment, head injury, diabetes, debilitating chronic headaches, foot pain, back and joint pain, and high incidence of

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<sup>7</sup> Desbarats J and Jackson KD: Research Among Vietnamese Refugees Reveals a Blood Bath, Wall Street Journal, p. 29, 22 Apr, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> Mollica R et al.: The Dose-Effect Relationships between Torture and Psychiatric Symptoms in Vietnamese Ex-Political Detainees and a Comparison Group, J Nerv Ment Dis: 186:543-553, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Mollica R et al: Brain structural abnormalities and mental health sequelae in South Vietnamese ex-political detainees who survived traumatic head injury and torture, Arch Gen Psychiatry, Nov 2009, available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19884610/>

<sup>10</sup> Vietnam's Persecution against Protesters during June 2018 Mass Demonstrations, Joint Submission to the United Nations Committee Against Torture for the Examination of the First State Report of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Oct 2018, available at: <https://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Information-for-CAT-examination-of-Vietnam-state-report.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Joint report by ACAT, BPSOS, CAT-VN, CSW, LIV and VNCAT submitted to the United Nations Committee Against Torture for the Examination of the First State Report of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Oct 2018, available at: <https://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Joint-report-for-the-examination-of-Vietnam-by-UNCAT.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Vietnam: Torture and abuse of Political and Religious Prisoners, CAT-VN, 2014, available at: <http://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/vietnam-torture-and-abuse-01-16-2014.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> “Vietnam: Pervasive Deaths, Injuries in Police Custody,” Human Rights Watch, 15 Sep, 2014, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/15/vietnam-pervasive-deaths-injuries-police-custody>

<sup>14</sup> Nguyen TD: Little Saigon protesters are marching in self-defense, Orange County Register, March 9, 1999.

stroke and heart disease. Ramifications are multiple. The psychological consequences of torture gravely affect family members as well. Spouses and children of torture survivors often suffer secondary traumatization.

Torture survivors need rehabilitation and psychological health services but do not have access to needed services. The Vietnamese Government does not recognize the existence of torture survivors, the injuries they suffered due to torture, or its obligations to provide psychological and medical services to torture survivors.

### **Victims of human trafficking**

In a small number of cases, victims of labor trafficking under the state-run labor export program were severely injured and became disabled. Upon to return to Vietnam, they were not identified as victim of trafficking and did not get any assistance let alone medical or mental health services.

Case in point: Ms. DTC is of Bana ethnicity from Binh Dinh Province. She has two sons (12 and 19 years old) left in Vietnam. She arrived in Saudi Arabia on October 30, 2018 and escaped from her employer on September 15, 2020, a month and a half before the end of her term of contract. She was very sick at the time due to beating, overwork and injury to her head. She lost sight in one eye and hearing in one ear. She suffered excruciating headache. Her employer raped her 5 or 6 times over the course of two years. She feared she would die unless she escaped. She reported to the police and the police sent her to the hospital. Doctors there could not treat her. She called the Vietnamese embassy for help, but never could get through to speak to anyone. No one called her back.<sup>15</sup> Upon return to Vietnam, on February 19, 2022 she wrote to government agencies seeking help and financial assistance and requesting criminal investigation against the labor export company that had sent her to Saudi Arabia. There has been no response.

### **Recommendations:**

To rectify the problems as described above and to further the rights of people with disability, we offer the following recommendations to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD):

- (1) Work with governments providing aid to the Vietnamese Government for disability services to refer a few test cases to Vietnamese service agencies that received the funding.
- (2) In collaboration with diplomatic missions of aid-giving governments, facilitate regular meetings with relevant Vietnamese government agencies for charity groups in Vietnam that provide assistance to disabled ARVN veterans.
- (3) Collaborate with the UN Committee Against Torture to request statistics from the Vietnamese Government about disabilities among victims of torture as well as treatment, rehabilitation, and social services provided to them.

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<sup>15</sup> “‘Em đau lắm’: Nữ lao động Việt Nam bị bạo hành tàn tệ, tuyệt vọng chờ về nước” (‘I’m in so much pain’: Vietnamese female worker brutally abused, desperately waiting to return home), VOA, 16 June, 2021, available at: <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/em-dau-lam-nu-lao-dong-viet-nam-bi-bao-hanh-tan-te-tuyet-vong-cho-ve-nuoc/5930676.html>

- (4) Consult representatives of diverse disability communities, including disabled ARVN veterans, victims of torture, former re-education camp detainees, and victims of human trafficking who became disabled due to violence committed by their traffickers.