

VIETNAM 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that all people have freedom of belief and religion. Current law, however, provides for significant government control over religious practices and includes vague provisions that permit restrictions on religious freedom in the stated interest of national security and social unity. The 2016 Law on Belief and Religion, scheduled to come into effect in January 2018, maintains these restrictions. The new law maintains a multistage registration and recognition process for religious groups; however, it shortens the time for recognition at the national or provincial level from 23 to five years. It also specifies the right of recognized religious organizations to have legal personality. There were two reports of deaths of members of religious groups in police custody; authorities said the deaths were suicides, but families said involved police use of force. Members of recognized groups or those with certificates of registration were reportedly able to practice their beliefs with less interference, although some recognized groups reported more difficulty gathering together. Religious leaders, particularly those representing groups without recognition or certificates of registration, reported various forms of government harassment, including physical assaults, arrests, prosecutions, monitoring, travel restrictions, property seizure or destruction, and denials of registration and/or other permissions. There were reports of severe harassment in the Central and Northwest Highlands and for Catholics in the north-central region of the country, especially in Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces. Religious followers reported local or provincial authorities committed the majority of harassment incidents. Members of religious groups said some local and provincial authorities used the local and national regulatory systems to slow, delegitimize, and suppress religious activities of groups that resisted close government management of their leadership structures, training programs, assemblies, and other activities.

In September a group of armed individuals reportedly disrupted a Mass at a Catholic church in Dong Nai Province. On several occasions throughout the year, several hundred members of reportedly progovernment groups demonstrated against Catholics in Nghe An Province.

During his visit to the country in January, the outgoing Secretary of State raised religious freedom in meetings with senior government officials. The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officials urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely, including the independent United Buddhist Church of

Vietnam (UBCV), Protestant and Catholic house churches, and independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. They sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups, and urged an end to restrictions on and harassment of groups without recognition or registration. The Ambassador and Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City advocated for religious freedom in visits across the country, including to the Central Highlands. The Ambassador and officials met regularly and maintained recurring contact with religious leaders across the country. The outgoing Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Vietnam in January. The Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor visited in May to participate in the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue. During their respective visits, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Acting Assistant Secretary advocated for improvements to freedom of religion in law and practice, and met with a range of recognized and unrecognized religious groups. Embassy and senior U.S. officials submitted to government leaders recommendations on language for the associated implementing decrees for the Law on Belief and Religion during the drafting process aimed at bringing the text more in line with the country's constitution and international commitments to protect religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 96.2 million (July 2017 estimate). According to statistics released by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), 26.4 percent of the population is categorized as religious believers, which does not include persons professing some kind of religious or spiritual beliefs, estimated to be 95 percent of the population according to previous CRA estimates. Of the population, 14.91 percent is Buddhist, 7.35 percent Roman Catholic, 1.09 percent Protestant, 1.16 percent Cao Dai, and 1.47 percent Hoa Hao Buddhist. Based on previous statistics, within the Buddhist community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic majority, while approximately 1.2 percent of the population, almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group, practices Theravada Buddhism. Smaller religious groups that combined constitute less than 0.16 percent of the population include a devotional form of Hinduism, mostly practiced by an estimated 70,000 ethnic Cham in the south-central coastal area; approximately 80,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country (approximately 40 percent are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam); an estimated 3,000 members of the Bahai Faith; and approximately 1,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Religious groups originating within the country (Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, Phat Giao Hieu

Nghia Ta Lon) comprise a total of 0.34 percent. A small, mostly foreign, Jewish population resides in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Other citizens say they have no religious affiliation, or practice animism or the veneration of ancestors, tutelary and protective saints, national heroes, or local, respected persons. Many individuals blend traditional practices with religious teachings, particularly Buddhism and Christianity.

According to the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, in 2015, 45.3 percent of the population was affiliated with “folk religion,” 16.4 percent with Buddhism, and 8.2 percent with Christianity, while 29.6 percent were unaffiliated.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14 percent of the population. Based on adherents’ estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including groups in the Northwest Highlands (H’mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and M’ning, among others, including groups referred to as Montagnards or Degar). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that all individuals have the right to freedom of belief and religion, including the freedom to follow no religion. The constitution acknowledges the right to freedom of religion or belief of those whose rights are limited, including inmates or any foreigners and stateless persons. The constitution states all religions are equal before the law and the state must respect and protect freedom of belief and religion. The constitution prohibits citizens from violating the freedom of belief and religion or taking advantage of a belief or religion in order to violate the law.

The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and implementation Decree 92, issued in 2012, serve as the primary documents governing religious practice. These will be replaced by the Law on Belief and Religion and implementing Decree 162, which will come into effect January 1, 2018. At year’s end a decree prescribing penalties for noncompliance with the new law was being finalized. Both the old and new laws reiterate citizens’ rights to freedom of belief and religion while also stipulating that individuals may not use the right of belief and religious freedom to undermine peace, national independence, and unification; incite violence or

propagate wars; proselytize in contravention of the state's laws and policies; divide people, nationalities, or religions; cause public disorder, infringe upon the life, health, dignity, honor and/or property of others, or impede the exercise of civic rights and performance of civic obligations; or conduct superstitious activities or otherwise violate the law.

The government recognizes 38 religious organizations and one dharma practice (a set of spiritual practices) affiliated with 15 distinct religious traditions as defined by the government. The 15 religious traditions are: Buddhism, Islam, Bahai, Catholicism, Protestantism, Mormonism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Buu Son Ky Huong, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Phat Duong Nam Tong Minh Su Dao, Minh Ly Dao Tam Tong Mieu, Khmer Brahmanism, and Hieu Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism. Distinct denominations within these religious traditions must seek their own registration and/or recognition. Two additional groups, the Assemblies of God and Ta Lon Dutiful and Loyal Buddhism, have "registration for religious operation" but are not recognized.

Current regulations and the new law provide for government control over religious practices and permit restrictions on religious freedom in the interest of "national security" and "social unity."

The new law reduces the waiting period for a religious group, and its affiliate group or groups, to obtain recognition from 23 years to five years, reduces the number of religion-related procedures requiring advance approval from authorities, aims to clarify the process by which religious organizations can obtain registration for their activities and recognition, and for the first time specifies the right of legal status for recognized religious groups and their affiliates. The law also specifies that religious groups be allowed to conduct educational, health, social protection, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws, but does not specify which law controls in instances in which the law may contradict other laws, or where other laws do not have clear provisions, such as the Law on Education.

The CRA is responsible for implementing religious laws and decrees. The CRA maintains offices at the central, provincial, and in some areas, district level. Current regulations and the new law lay out specific responsibilities for central-, province-, and local-level CRA offices, and delegate certain religion-related management tasks to provincial- and local-level people's committees (i.e. local leaders). The central-level CRA is charged with disseminating information to

authorities and assuring uniform compliance with the legal framework on religion at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels.

Current regulations in force during the year and the new law state forcing others to follow, or renounce, a religion or belief is prohibited.

Current regulations prescribe a multistage process to obtain registration and recognition. A religious organization must first apply for and obtain a “registration of religious practice” from the commune-level government by providing a dossier of information, including on its structure, leadership, membership, and activities. A registration of religious practice allows a group of individuals to gather at a specified location to “practice worship rituals, pray, or express their religious faith.” After operating lawfully for 20 years under a registration of religious practice, a religious organization is permitted to apply for a “registration for religious operation” with the provincial or national-level CRA, depending on the geographic extent of the group’s activities. A registration for religious operation allows the group to conduct religious ceremonies, services, and preaching at the registered venue; hold congresses to adopt its charter and statutes; elect or designate its leaders and organize training courses on religious tenets; repair and renovate its facilities; and conduct missionary, charity, and humanitarian activities. Three years after obtaining a registration for religious operation, a religious organization becomes eligible to apply for legal recognition after electing its leaders through a national convention. The application for recognition must include information about the organization’s leadership, number of believers, history of operations, tenets and canons, and bylaws. Under current regulations, applications for recognition must be approved by the prime minister (for religious organizations operating in more than one province) or the chairman of the provincial people’s committee (for religious organizations operating within one province).

At every stage of the registration and recognition application process, current regulations specify time limits for an official response, which may be up to 45 days, depending on the scope of the request. Although current regulations require government authorities to explain formally any denial in writing, the denial may be for any reason, given the significant discretion the law gives to those authorities.

The new law also prescribes a multistage process for a religious organization to receive recognition. Under the new law, first, an unrecognized religious organization must obtain a certificate of registration for religious activities from

the provincial-level CRA (if the organization will operate only within one province) or national-level CRA (if the organization will operate in multiple provinces). To obtain such registration, the organization must submit a detailed application package with information about its doctrine, history, bylaws, leaders, and members and proof it has a legal meeting location. The relevant provincial CRA office or the Ministry of Home Affairs, depending on whether the group in question is operating in one or more provinces, is responsible for approving a valid application for registration within 60 days of receipt. The relevant provincial CRA office or the Ministry of Home Affairs is required to provide any rejection in writing.

Under the new law, religious organizations with a certificate of registration (“registered religious organizations”) are allowed to preach, organize religious ceremonies, and conduct religious classes at approved locations; organize conferences to approve its charter and bylaws; elect or appoint leaders; repair or renovate religious facilities; and conduct charitable or humanitarian activities. Under the new law, however, a wide variety of these religious activities continues to require advance approval or registration from government authorities. The new law states that all such activities must also comply with other laws governing construction and charitable activities.

The new law permits a religious organization to apply for recognition after it has operated continuously for at least five years with legal registration, developed a legal charter and bylaws, had leaders in good standing without a criminal record, and managed assets and conducts transactions as its own entity. After meeting these requirements, a registered religious organization must submit a detailed application package to the provincial- or national-level CRA, depending on the geographic extent of the organization. The application must include information about the group’s structure, membership, location, history, charter, and finances. The relevant provincial people’s committee or the Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for approving a valid application for recognition within 60 days of receipt. The relevant provincial people’s committee or Ministry of Home Affairs is required to provide any rejection in writing.

Under current regulations, the government has regulatory oversight of religious groups, which must be officially registered or recognized as formal religious organizations. Current regulations stipulate that local government authorities must approve the leadership, activities, and establishment of seminaries or religious classes, and require religious organizations to register their leaders and officials

with the CRA at the central or provincial level. Current regulations specify curriculum guidelines for religious training institutions.

Under both current law and the new law, religious organizations have the right to publish religious materials, produce and export religious objects and icons, construct and maintain religious facilities, and accept donations from domestic and foreign sources. Both current law and the new law imply, but do not specify, that these rights apply only to recognized religious organizations. Religious organizations must also follow other laws governing publishing.

Current regulations do not specify whether religious organizations have legal personality. The new law, however, states a recognized religious organization will attain the status of a “noncommercial legal person” from the date of its recognition. There is no provision for registered but unrecognized religious organizations to attain such legal personality. Organizations previously recognized before the implementation of the new law will retain their recognized status and organizations with certificates of registration before the implementation of the new law will retain their certificates of registration. Affiliates of a recognized organization are permitted to apply for their own legal personality.

The new law makes it explicit that religious organizations and their affiliates, clergy, and believers have the right to file complaints or civil and administrative lawsuits, or make denunciations (formal complaints about government officials or agencies) under the relevant laws and decrees. The new law also states that organizations and individuals have the right to bring civil lawsuits in court regarding the actions of religious groups or believers. There are no specific analogous provisions in the current regulations.

A 2005 prime ministerial directive regarding Protestantism instructs authorities to help unrecognized and unregistered Protestant congregations register so they can worship openly and seek recognition. The directive specifically instructs authorities in the Central and Northwest Highlands to assist groups of Protestants to register their religious activities and practice in homes or “suitable locations,” even if they do not meet the criteria to establish an official congregation. The directive also instructs local officials in the Central Highlands, central region, and the southern Annamese Mountains region to allow unrecognized “house churches” to operate as long as they are “committed to abide by the law” and are not affiliated with separatist political movements or “Degar Protestantism.” According to CRA officials, this directive will not remain in effect when the new law comes into effect.

Both current regulations and the new law provide a separate process for unregistered, unrecognized religious organizations or groups of individuals to receive permission for specific religious activities by submitting an application package to the commune-level people's committee. Current regulations require the people's committee to respond in writing to such an application within 15 working days of receipt, while the new law requires a response in writing within 20 days of receipt.

Both current regulations and the new law specify that a wide variety of religious activities require advance approval or registration from the authorities at the central and/or local levels. Under the new law, these activities continue to include "belief activities" (defined as traditional communal practices related to ancestor, hero, or folk worship); "belief festivals" being held for the first time; the establishment, split, or merger of religious affiliates; the ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); establishment of a religious training facility; conducting religious training classes; holding major religious congresses; organizing religious events, preaching, or evangelizing outside of approved locations; traveling abroad to conduct religious activities or training; and joining a foreign religious organization.

According to current regulations, certain religious activities do not require advance approval, but instead require notification to the appropriate authorities. Activities requiring notification include recurring or periodic "belief festivals;" dismissal of clergy; conducting fundraising activities; notification of enrollment figures at a seminary or religious school; and the repair or renovation of religious facilities not considered cultural-historical relics. Under the new law, additional activities requiring notification and not advance approval include the ordination, appointment, or assignment of religious clergy (such as monks); transfers or dismissals of religious administrators (or clergy with administrative authority); conducting operations at an approved religious training facility; routine religious activities (defined as "religious preaching, practicing religious tenets and rites, and management of a religious organization"); and internal conferences of a religious organization.

The new law provides prisoners access to religious materials, with conditions, while in detention. It reserves authority for the government to restrict the "assurance" of that right. Decree 162 states detainees may use religious documents that are legally published and circulated, in line with legal provisions on custody, detention, prison, or other types of confinement. This use and/or practice must not

affect rights to belief/religion or nonbelief/religion of others, or go against relevant laws. The decree states the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs shall be responsible for providing guidelines on the management of religious documents, and the time and venue for the use of these documents.

The new law gives recognized groups and “individuals who have rights or duties concerned” the right to complain, bring an administrative lawsuit, bring a civil lawsuit, or file a request for handling a civil matter in court to protect their lawful rights and interests in accordance with relevant laws.

Both the current and new laws specify that religious organizations must follow numerous other laws for certain activities. Both laws specify that religious organizations are allowed to conduct educational, health, charitable, and humanitarian activities in accordance with the relevant laws, but do not provide clarification as to which activities are permitted. In addition, both laws state that construction or renovation of religious facilities must abide by relevant laws and regulations on construction, and foreigners participating in religious activities must abide by immigration law.

Both the current and new laws state that publishing, producing, exporting, or importing religious texts must be in accordance with laws and regulations related to publishing. Publishing legislation requires all publishers be licensed public entities or state-owned enterprises. Publishers must receive prior government approval to publish all documents, including religious texts. By decree, only the Religious Publishing House may publish religious books. In practice, however, other licensed publishers print books on religion. Publishers have received permission to print the Bible in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M’nung, H’mong, C’ho, and English. Other published texts include, but are not limited to, works pertaining to ancestry worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Cao Dai. Any bookstore may sell legally published religious texts and other religious materials.

The constitution states the government owns and manages all land on behalf of the people. According to the new law, land use by religious organizations must conform to the land law and its related decrees. The land law recognizes licensed religious institutions and schools may acquire land use rights and be allocated or leased land. The law specifies religious institutions are eligible for state compensation if their land is seized under eminent domain. The law allows

provincial-level people's committees to seize land via eminent domain in order to facilitate the construction of religious facilities.

The land law states provincial-level people's committees may grant land-use certificates for a "long and stable term" to religious institutions if they have permission to operate, the land is dispute-free, and the land was not acquired via transfer or donation after July 1, 2004. Religious institutions are not permitted to exchange, transfer, lease, donate, or mortgage their land-use rights. In the case of land disputes involving a religious institution, the chairperson of the provincial-level people's committee has authority to settle disputes. Those who disagree with the chairperson's decision may appeal to the minister of natural resources and environment or file a lawsuit in court.

In practice, if a religious organization has not obtained recognition, members of the congregation may acquire a land-use title individually, but not corporately as a religious establishment. The renovation or upgrade of religious facilities also requires notification to authorities, although it does not necessarily require a permit, depending on the extent of the renovation. Decree 92 stipulates authorities must respond to a construction permit application within 20 days, although the law does not provide for accountability if the authorities do not comply with the deadline.

The 2005 prime ministerial Directive on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism calls on authorities to facilitate the requests of recognized Protestant denominations to construct churches and to train and appoint pastors.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public and private schools. Private schools are required to follow a government-approved curriculum, which does not allow for religious instruction.

The law does not require individuals to specify their religious affiliation on national identification cards.

There are separate provisions of the new law for foreigners legally resident in the country to request permission to conduct religious activities, teach, attend local religious training, or preach in local religious institutions. The new law requires religious organizations or citizens of the country to receive government permission in advance of hosting or conducting any religious activities involving foreign organizations, foreign individuals, or travel abroad. Current regulations also contain requirements for foreigners conducting religious activities within the

country, including those involved in religious training, ordination, and leadership, to seek permission for their activities.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: There were two reports of deaths of members of religious groups in police custody that authorities said were suicides but the families said involved police use of force. Members of religious groups said government treatment varied widely regionally and among the central, provincial, and local levels. Members of some unregistered religious groups reported the ability to gather without government interference in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, although some groups reported increased difficulties in Ho Chi Minh City, and said they were required to provide weekly attendance lists to authorities. Religious leaders, particularly those of unregistered groups outside Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and those from ethnic minorities, reported various forms of government harassment, including physical assaults, arrests and detention, prosecutions, monitoring, restrictions on travel, property seizure or destruction, and denials of registration and/or other permissions. According to sources in religious group, local authorities were not often held responsible for the reported incidents. Government authorities continued to limit the activities of unrecognized religious groups and those without certificates of registration for religious activities, particularly those the government believed to be engaged in political activity. Members of recognized groups or those with registrations were able to practice their beliefs with less interference, according to reports; however, there was a significant increase in incidents of plainclothes individuals harassing Catholic priests and parishioners throughout the country, according to religious leaders, followers, and social media. Leaders of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North reported increased difficulty gathering at unregistered meeting points. State-run media and progovernment blogs carried articles critical of Catholics and Catholic leadership throughout the year.

On or about May 5, Ma Seo Sung died while in custody at a Dak Lak provincial police station, Tu An Ward, Buon Ma Thuot City, according to a nongovernmental organization (NGO). On April 30, Ea So commune police reportedly arrested Sung and his nephew Giang A Lang on suspicion of “searching for a new Christian homeland.” Dak Lak provincial police reported the two were arrested for drug possession. Dak Lak provincial police informed Sung’s family May 5 that Sung

hanged himself in the detention center. Observers said the family's photos of the body showed signs of blunt force trauma.

On May 2, public security officials in Vinh Long Province arrested Nguyen Huu Tan, an independent Hoa Hao follower, on charges of "propaganda against the state" and "carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration," according to social media and other sources. Security officials reportedly suspected him of hanging the flag of the former Republic of Vietnam in his house. On May 3, security officials informed Tan's family that he had committed suicide by cutting his neck while he was in detention. A public security officer returned Tan's body to his family the same day. Tan's family members, via a video posted to Facebook, stated they believed local public security officials cut Tan's neck to make his death appear as suicide. Reportedly, Vinh Long Province authorities harassed Tan's family members after his death, for example, encouraging neighbors not to patronize their small restaurant or grocery store, following them when they visited the market, and calling on neighbors to socially isolate them. Tan's mother and two of his brothers had to hide from local authorities. Local public security officers reportedly questioned all people visiting Tan's family and asked close friends of the family to spy on the family and report back to them.

On July 30, independent Hoa Hao follower and religious freedom and human rights activist Nguyen Bac Truyen and Protestant Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton were separately arrested for "carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration." Truyen ran the Vietnamese Political and Religious Prisoners Friendship Association and, among other activities, advocated for the rights of independent and unregistered Hoa Hao followers. Ton was a long-time advocate for human rights and religious freedom. He was also a member of the Interfaith Council, a group composed predominately of representatives of nonregistered religions. Prior to his July arrest, on February 27, Ton and a relative were kidnapped and beaten by unknown assailants, according to multiple sources. They were found seriously injured at approximately 2 a.m. the next day outside a forest in Ha Tinh Province.

On June 26, in An Phu, An Giang Province, police arrested independent Hoa Hao Buddhists, including Bui Van Trung and members of his family, including two grandchildren, aged 16 and 11, and placed his wife, Le Thi Hen, and one of his daughters under home detention, pending an investigation for "causing public disorder." The grandchildren were subsequently released. Police reportedly assaulted Bui Thi Tham, Trung's daughter, who required a brief hospitalization.

Police released her from custody, but Trung and his son, Bui Van Tham, remained in detention, and his wife and another daughter, Bui Thi Bich Tuyen, remained under home detention at year's end. The June arrests were reportedly in connection with the family's protests of police actions, including roadblocks and harassment of participants, during an unregistered death anniversary commemoration in April for Trung's mother in his home's prayer hall. Between April and June police reportedly called in for questioning some persons who attended; plainclothes individuals beat others. Authorities reportedly tried to investigate the group on national security grounds. Between June and November family members attended approximately 30 working sessions with authorities, and said their religious group's sole desire was to worship peacefully.

From January to July, the health of Nguyen Cong Chinh, a Protestant pastor serving an 11-year prison sentence for "undermining state unity," reportedly continued to decline. Chinh's wife suspected he was not receiving medicine she supplied to prison authorities and said prison officers encouraged other prisoners to verbally harass him. She also reported local police in Pleiku, Gia Lai Province, repeatedly detained, harassed, and threatened her throughout the first half of the year, including on one occasion when diplomats visited Pleiku in March. On July 28, authorities suspended Chinh's sentence, and he relocated to the U.S.

On September 1, authorities transferred Phan Van Thu, leader of the religious group An Dan Dai Dao, from An Phuoc Prison in Binh Duong Province to Gia Trung Detention Center in Gia Lai Province, which is closer to his wife. Phan Van Thu was sentenced to life in prison in 2013 for "carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration."

Members of various ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands collectively known as Degar (or Montagnards) stated the government continued to monitor, interrogate, arbitrarily arrest, and discriminate against them, in part because of their religious practices. Officials stated that Degar Christians incited violent separatism by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands from 2001 through 2008. State-run media published articles cautioning individuals not to follow Degar Protestantism.

Some Protestant church leaders and Montagnards stated that local authorities seized their land or property partly due to their religious beliefs. Provincial authorities routinely dispersed religious gatherings and directed officials to organize public renunciations of Degar Christianity or other "unauthorized Christian beliefs" among ethnic minority communities. Leaders and members of

these unregistered congregations reported police harassment, such as being detained for questioning, undergoing increased surveillance, and having their cell phones and Bibles confiscated. There were reports of severe harassment in Dak Lak, Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Binh Phuoc, Tra Vinh and Phu Yen Provinces, among others.

In one case, according to an NGO, throughout the year government forces in Ea Lam Commune, Song Hinh District in Phu Yen Province, monitored suspected churchgoers of the Degar Evangelical Church in Pung B Hamlet, interrogated them about their religious activities, and accused them of plotting to illegally leave the country and of receiving instructions from overseas antigovernment groups. On February 10, Phu Yen Province police issued an order to pursue Ksor Y Blia, a Degar church pastor, for organizing and leading illegal emigration to Thailand. On February 14, the chief of the commune police met Nay H Oanh, Ksor Y Blia's daughter, and reportedly forbade her from remaining in the Degar Evangelical Church and threatened to incarcerate her unless she complied.

According to an unrecognized religious group, on July 12, public security officials in Ea Khit Village, Ea Bhok Commune, Cu Kuin District, Dak Lak Province, brought Pastor Y Joh Buon Krong before the villagers and forced him to recant his faith. The pastor was the head of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Christ in Ea Khit.

In some cases, Montagnards stated ongoing social and religious persecution drove them to flee to Cambodia and Thailand, sometimes to seek asylum. Several individuals seeking asylum in Thailand reported local Vietnamese authorities continued to harass them remotely, including through social media and by harassing, intimidating, and in some cases physically assaulting family members back home.

In Van Thai parish, Vinh Diocese, Nghe An Province, there were multiple incidents of plainclothes individuals harassing parishioners and priests, assaulting parishioners, and damaging church property and the property of parishioners. In one such instance, on May 30, plainclothes individuals reportedly surrounded the church during Mass, insulted parishioners, threw stones at their vehicles and houses, and damaged the altar. Authorities reportedly did not stop these incidents.

State-run media and progovernment blogs attempted to defame priests active in assisting activists and victims of the 2016 Formosa disaster in which a steel mill discharged toxic waste into the sea leading to a massive fish kill in the central part

of the country. Authorities reportedly pressured priests who helped victims to leave their parishes. In early May state-run social organizations, such as the Veteran's Association and Women's Union, organized protests against Fathers Dang Huu Nam and Nguyen Dinh Thuc of Vinh Diocese, Nghe An, over the priests' efforts to help victims of the Formosa disaster. Progovernment blogs published multiple articles criticizing Catholic priests, accusing them of receiving money from and "colluding with hostile forces with the purpose of inciting public disorder and acting against the Communist Party and State." Authorities arrested several Catholic activists during the year, and others Catholic activists were in hiding or had fled to other countries to seek refuge.

On April 16, in the Northwest Highlands, authorities prevented priests from conducting Easter Mass at a Catholic house church in Muong Khuong District, Lao Cai Province, according to accounts on social media.

State media reported authorities at different levels in the Northwest Highlands continued to state that the Duong Van Minh religious group was a threat to national security, political stability, and social order. Authorities said they considered eliminating (membership in) the group a priority.

In January, local authorities in Cho Moi, An Giang Province, prevented independent Hoa Hao followers from celebrating the birth anniversary of the prophet Huynh Phu So, according to religious leaders.

On January 6, authorities in Vo Nhai District, Thai Nguyen Province, dismantled a *nha don*, a public building used for funeral rites by Duong Van Minh adherents, in Lan Thung hamlet, Phuong Giao Commune. A clash between the authorities and villagers broke out; two local police officers were wounded. Following the incident, seven villagers received "administrative fines" for "acting against persons on duty." The media did not report on what, if any, sanctions the officers involved faced.

On October 3, media reported that authorities started a manhunt for blogger and Catholic former prisoner of conscience Tran Minh Nhat, who was released from prison in 2015 after completing his full jail term. Authorities said he had defied the terms of his three-year probationary period. Nhat said a recent court of appeals ruling had removed the probation requirement, and he told media he had not been aware of the manhunt order.

The Evangelical Council of Vietnam (ECVN) reported it had increased difficulty gathering in well-established meeting points during the year. According to ECVN leadership, local authorities in Thanh Hoa Province rejected registration of eight meeting points for Christmas celebrations in Pu Nhi, Nhi Son, and Quang Chieu communes, Muong Lat District. These were reportedly areas where ECVN groups had gathered previously for between six and 10 years without incident. In their rejections, authorities noted that these prior gatherings were illegal and explained the meeting-points had not fulfilled requirements for organizing and conducting religious gatherings – for example, they had “no legal representatives who coordinate with the authorities in exercising the state management of religious activities in line with the law” or failed “to meet order and safety requirements.” Authorities urged believers to practice their faith or celebrate Christmas at their own houses, should they wish.

Some religious leaders faced travel restrictions, and leaders and followers of certain religious groups faced restrictions on movement. Catholic Father Nguyen Ngoc Nam Phong, and Pastor Than Van Truong, of an unregistered Protestant group, were separately prevented from leaving the country on “national security” grounds on June 27 and October 3, respectively.

Three Redemptorist Catholic priests and a Buddhist monk reported they were restricted from traveling to attend a special Mass for the feast of Immaculate Conception in Dong Nai Province in December. Police stopped and beat Fathers Anthony Le Ngoc Thanh, Paul Le Xuan Loc, and Joseph Truong Hoang Vu on their way to the Mass. Police detained the three priests for three hours before releasing them. Reportedly, Venerable Thich Khong Tanh, Abbot of the Lien Tri Pagoda, who was invited to attend the Mass, was blocked from leaving his home on this occasion and at other times during the year. When he could leave, he was closely followed by plainclothes police.

In March, April, and June independent Hoa Hao followers and activists reported local authorities, police, and suspected plainclothes police in several provinces, including An Giang, Vinh Long, and Dong Thap, and in Can Tho City established checkpoints to monitor and prevent them from travelling to Quang Minh Pagoda, which the government said was unregistered, to participate in a major religious commemoration. Local authorities reportedly said the government would not allow Hoa Hao followers to commemorate anniversaries related to the life of Prophet Huynh Phu So. Some unregistered Hoa Hao followers said their Facebook accounts were locked.

As in previous years, UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do reported authorities permitted him to leave the Thanh Minh Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City only for quarterly medical check-ups. Other UBCV leaders stated the government continued to monitor their activities and restrict their movements, although they were able to meet with some foreign diplomats, visit other UBCV members, and maintain contact with associates overseas. Between March and September, Le Cong Cau, General Secretary of the UBCV, reported local police interrogated him on several occasions for “abusing democratic freedoms.” He also stated that on May 14, local security police in Hue, Thua-Thien Hue Province, prevented him from leaving his home. Cau was on a hunger strike from May 15 to 22, to protest authorities’ preventing his visit to Thich Quang Do. On September 11, a police officer prevented a foreign diplomat from meeting Cau in his home.

Between April and July, authorities interrogated and threatened to detain Ngo Duc Tien and Nguyen Van De, two leaders of the Buddhist Youth Movement (BYM) of the UBCV, and pressured them to renounce membership in the UBCV, according to an NGO report. The two youth leaders refused to sign a statement admitting any wrongdoing.

On October 31, after Dam Thoa, a nun, visited Thich Vinh Phuoc, the head of the UBCV-affiliated Phuoc Buu Pagoda in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province, authorities reportedly escorted her to the airport in Ho Chi Minh City and flew her home to Bac Giang Province where local authorities met her and then held her in a pagoda for 13 days with limited food and without a bathroom. She was released November 13 following the conclusion of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders’ Week meetings in Danang and the visits of foreign leaders to Hanoi.

On July 19, local authorities in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province reportedly prevented some people from participating in a memorial ceremony at Phuoc Buu Pagoda in honor of Reverend Thich Minh Tue and threatened to arrest those who attended. The pagoda is affiliated with the UBCV. An NGO reported police officers infiltrated the area the night before the ceremony and plainclothes agents with suspected connections to local authorities rode motorcycles through the community while cursing at members of the congregation. The next morning, approximately 20 police officers reportedly stationed themselves outside the temple and questioned everyone who came to the ceremony, wrote down vehicle identification information, and took pictures and video recordings. Authorities also recorded similar information during a ceremony at the pagoda on September 5. On December 27, local authorities started constructing a new small ditch right in front

of the pagoda's gate, inhibiting its religious activities and followers from visiting the pagoda.

On January 13, individuals wearing masks, reportedly police, disrupted the year-end celebration of UBCV-affiliated An Cu Temple in Danang, beat adherents, seized cell phones, and stopped the religious event. Other individuals blocked the streets leading to the temple to deny access to followers.

On July 27, an NGO reported six officers from Hoai Tan Commune, Hoai Nhon District, Binh Dinh Province, verbally harassed followers at the independent Cao Dai Nam Hoai Nhan Temple while they were preparing for customary rites. In March authorities of Dong Thap Province disrupted a group of independent Cao Dai adherents in Tam Nong District and seized their temple for an officially recognized Cao Dai group to use, according to media reports. Village, district, and provincial authorities attempted to force the independent Cao Dai adherents to join a sanctioned Cao Dai group, the independent adherents told the media.

Registered Cao Dai leaders reportedly did not face the same difficulties as independent Cao Dai leaders. The media carried reports of registered Cao Dai celebrating festivals without impediment.

In July police and local authorities in Hue reportedly harassed, intimidated, and intercepted members of the BYM as they organized the movement's annual summer camp in Hue.

On June 28, priests, bloggers, and activists reported nearly 100 suspected plainclothes police in Thua Thien-Hue Province broke into the Thien An Catholic Monastery. The individuals pushed down a cross and smashed its figure of Christ. The authorities reportedly attempted to pressure the monastery into surrendering its land for a tourism project. On July 12, the Thua-Thien Hue People's Committee met clerics from the monastery and Archdiocese of Hue officials to try to resolve the nearly 20-year-old land dispute. The five-hour meeting marked the first official working session between the monastery and provincial authorities. Although the dispute remained unresolved, both sides stated they welcomed the opportunity for dialogue. Subsequent to that meeting, monks reported that road construction by the authorities in Hue caused water shortages at the monastery. According to social media and Radio Free Asia, on December 23, the Thua Thien Hue People's Committee sent a note to the leadership of the Order of St. Benedict, both in Rome and in Vietnam, accusing Father Nguyen Van Duc, chief priest of Thien An Monastery, of organizing illegal activities, defying Vietnamese laws, and

not respecting the local authorities and people. Accordingly, the committee requested the leadership of the Benedictine Order to remove Father Duc as chief priest of Thien An Monastery and transfer him out of Thua Thien Hue Province.

Multiple Buddhist clergy of the recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha who supported land rights activists or were outspoken about suspected corruption within the organization, again reported local authorities continued to harass them and members of their pagodas in Bac Giang and Ha Nam Provinces and Hanoi. They said harassment included intimidation of monks and nuns, expulsion by force of clergy from their buildings, suspected plainclothes police breaking into religious buildings, the destruction of pagoda property, and theft of cash donations from villagers.

Catholic priest Phan Van Loi in Hue reported local public security officials continued to closely watch individuals who visited his home and to monitor his communication. Loi stated in 2016 that authorities took these actions in retaliation for his activism for religious freedom and human rights.

Throughout the year, Falun Gong practitioners reported harassment by authorities in many provinces, including Cao Bang, Lang Son, Son La, Nghe An, Hue, Lam Dong, Dong Thap, Ca Mau, Ho Chi Minh City, Nha Trang, Quang Ngai, Hue, and Hanoi. Harassment included local authorities asking them to leave the parks where practitioners had gathered and individuals blaring loud music and throwing items such as fish sauce on practitioners in public spaces.

Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang reported suspected security officials in Ho Chi Minh City occasionally threw rocks, waste, and rotten eggs at Mennonite churches and Quang's home.

Mennonite pastors of unregistered churches in Ho Chi Minh City reported that police, local authorities, and suspected plainclothes police monitored, intimidated, and harassed church leaders and congregants throughout the year.

Registered and unregistered religious groups continued to state government agencies sometimes did not respond to registration applications or approval requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often did not specify reasons for refusals. Some groups reported they successfully appealed local decisions to higher-level authorities through informal channels. Several religious leaders reported authorities sometimes asked for bribes to facilitate approvals. Some groups stated local authorities refused to process

registration applications during the year due to expected new guidelines under the new law. Authorities attributed the delays and denials to the failure of applicants to complete forms correctly or provide complete information. Local authorities also continued to cite general security concerns, such as political destabilization or potential conflict between followers of established ethnic or traditional religious beliefs and newly introduced Christian beliefs. Some Protestant house churches stated local authorities used registration requirements to harass followers and pressure the religious groups to cease religious activities. Religious groups said the process to register groups or notify activities in new locations was particularly difficult. For example, churches affiliated with the ECVN had difficulty registering with local authorities in Quang Binh, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh and Hoa Binh Provinces.

Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang reported local authorities in District 2, Ho Chi Minh City, continued to reject his congregation's application for registration, without providing specific reasons. Catholic authorities reported Hoa Binh authorities repeatedly denied Luong Son parish's application to become a parish-affiliate of Hoa Binh Diocese and did not respond to a similar request from Vu Ban parish. Authorities reportedly said the Long Son application was not complete and Vu Ban is a new parish, which the Church disputed.

Local authorities in some Central Highlands provinces reportedly continued to pressure smaller Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) congregations, some with as many as 100 followers, to combine into larger groups of up to 1,500 individuals in order to gain official registration. Church leaders again stated such requests were unreasonable, saying many of the congregations were composed of a variety of ethnic minority groups with different languages and incongruent worship practices. Mountainous terrain and lack of infrastructure in the rural highlands prevented other SECV churches from sustaining the required minimum number of followers necessary to qualify for local registration.

Some registered and unregistered Protestant groups continued to report local authorities, particularly in the Central Highlands, continued to pressure newer congregations to affiliate with existing congregations or other, more established denominations. Pastors said this practice was widespread in ethnic minority villages in Gia Lai and Kon Tum Provinces.

According to many Catholic bishops, parishes in remote areas or with majority ethnic minority populations continued to face difficulty registering with provincial authorities, uneven and inconsistent enforcement of national laws, and a lack of

accountability on the part of provincial authorities. Catholic leaders again stated the most problematic regions were in the Central Highlands (Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Kon Tum, and Lam Dong Provinces), the Northwest Highlands, and Hoa Binh Province.

Some Buddhist, Protestant, and Cao Dai groups chose not to affiliate with any government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations, nor did they seek their own registration or recognition. Unregistered Buddhist, Cao Dai, and Christian religious groups, including members of the Interfaith Council, continued to regularly report some provincial authorities used local registration laws as a pretext to pressure, intimidate, threaten, extort, harass, and assault them, and discouraged their members' participation in the groups.

The CRA reported that, as of October 30, provincial authorities in the north recognized eight new grassroots congregations, and local authorities registered 655 meeting points for congregations affiliated with ECVN, one of the two largest evangelical Christian churches. ECVN said provincial authorities recognized six new grassroots congregations in the north during the year. Numbers were not available for the south.

Religious believers, particularly members of organizations that had not applied for or been granted legal registration, continued to report intimidation by local security officials for attending religious services.

Members of the military reportedly were not permitted to read the Bible or practice religious rites at any time while on active duty; they had to take personal leave to conduct such activities, religious freedom experts again reported. The Association for the Protection of Freedom of Religion reportedly sent a petition to the government in 2015 requesting soldiers be allowed to attend church while on duty; however, the association still had yet to receive a response. There are no clear regulations for religious expression in the military, with individual unit commanders having significant discretion, experts reported.

In some cases, authorities continued to deny some prisoners and detainees the right to worship. Prison officers at the temporary detention center in Khanh Hoa Province did not allow Catholic prisoner Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh access to a Bible, according to reports. Officers at the Nam Ha detention facility, Phu Ly District, Ha Nam Province, refused to allow a priest to visit Catholic prisoner Ho Duc Hoa, according to his family. Other prisoners continued to report they were

allowed to read the Bible or other religious materials and practice their beliefs while incarcerated.

On October 22, the Bahai community held bicentennial celebration ceremonies in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Danang with reportedly no government interference.

Local and central authorities permitted ceremonies with tens of thousands of participants commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation to take place in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in November and December, respectively. Authorities permitted a foreign religious leader to lead the ceremonies in Hanoi.

A senior pastor of the Presbyterian Church reported that local authorities did not allow the church to organize summer camps for children in Central Highlands and Northern Highlands, and asked some members not to worship in Quang Ngai, Ninh Thuan, Dak Lak and Dak Nong Provinces.

On February 16, authorities prevented Father Leopoldo Girelli, at the time the nonresident papal representative to the country, from leading Mass in honor of Father Jean Baptiste Malo, recognized as a martyr by the Catholic Church, in Vinh Hoi parish, Ngan Sau District, Vinh City, Nghe An Province.

Although the law prohibits publishing of all materials, including religious materials, without government approval, in practice some private, unlicensed publishing houses continued to unofficially print and distribute religious texts without active government interference.

At year's end, Venerable Thich Khong Tanh and monks from the Lien Tri Pagoda, which district authorities in Ho Chi Minh City demolished in 2016, were still living at various locations throughout the city. Thanh reported local authorities refused to offer any site to rebuild the pagoda other than the one previously offered in the Cat Lai area of Ho Chi Minh City, which Thanh found inappropriate.

Relocation discussions between authorities and leaders of the Dong Men Thanh Gia (Lovers of the Holy Cross) Thu Thiem Catholic Convent and Thu Thiem Catholic Church continued at year's end.

The Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres in Hanoi reported a local property development company sought to construct an apartment building, using land-use certificates

improperly issued by city officials, on convent land seized by authorities in 1954. Despite the authorities' decision to suspend the construction in July 2016 amid protests, construction resumed in January.

In June Lam Dong authorities returned a building taken by the government nearly 40 years ago to Lam Dong Province SECV, according to media reports.

The government continued to restrict the number of students who could enroll in Catholic and Protestant seminaries. The churches' leadership said the numbers allowed were inadequate to meet demand.

Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Bahai, and Buddhist groups were allowed to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities. Students continued to participate in training sessions on fundamental Buddhist philosophy organized at pagodas nationwide during summer holidays.

Protestant and Catholic groups continued to report legal restrictions and lack of legal clarity on operating faith-based medical and educational facilities made them wary of attempting to open hospitals or parochial schools, despite government statements welcoming religious groups to expand participation in health, education, and charitable activities. Catholic representatives said the government refused to return hospitals, clinics, and schools seized from the Catholic Church in past decades. On July 19, the Ministry of Labor, Invalid, and Social Affairs approved an upgrade for the Hoa Binh vocational training school owned and run by the Xuan Loc Diocese, Trang Bom District, Dong Nai Province. The majority of educational facilities owned and run by religious groups continued to be kindergartens and preschools.

In several cases local authorities permitted religious organizations to operate social services. For example, in Hanoi, city officials continued to allow Protestant house churches to operate drug rehabilitation centers; however, a Protestant church in Quoc Oai continued to face difficulty expanding operations, according to the church leadership.

Most representatives of religious groups continued to report adherence to a registered religious group generally did not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernmental civil, economic, and secular life, but that adherence to an unregistered group was more disadvantageous. Practitioners of various registered religions served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Many nationally recognized religious organizations,

such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, as well as other clergy and religious followers, were members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an umbrella group for government-affiliated organizations under the guidance of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). High-ranking government officials sent greetings and visited churches during Christmas and Easter and attended Vesak activities commemorating the birth of the Buddha. The official resumes of the top four CPV leaders stated they followed no religion.

While Catholics and Protestants could serve in the enlisted ranks (including during temporary mandatory military service), commissioned officers were not permitted to be religious believers. Religious adherents were customarily excluded through the military recruitment process.

Government treatment of foreigners seeking to worship or proselytize varied in practice from locality to locality. Foreigners were generally able to meet with believers and conduct services; however, a recognized group expressed concern over difficulty securing appropriate travel visas (for religious purposes) for their religious workers. Municipal officials allowed multiple foreign religious congregations to meet and processed official paperwork for two international Protestant groups. Some foreign religious congregations could conduct charitable activities with tacit, but not official, permission.

During the year, authorities lifted travel restrictions on certain religious leaders. Authorities permitted Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh to visit Danang and Hue, his first visit to the country in a decade.

A wide range of senior- and provincial-level government officials stated during the year that the country fully respected the religious freedom of its citizens and criticized reports of religious freedom abuses and travel restrictions as inaccurate. The government stated it continued to monitor the activities of certain religious groups because of their political activism and invoked national security and solidarity provisions in the constitution and penal code to override laws and regulations providing for religious freedom. For example, government actions included impeding some religious gatherings and blocking attempts by religious groups to proselytize to certain ethnic groups in border regions deemed to be sensitive, including the Central Highlands, Northwest Highlands, and certain Mekong Delta provinces.

Many religious leaders expressed a wait-and-see approach to the Law on Belief and Religion. Religious leaders and experts emphasized that the two implementing

decrees and actual implementation of the law, particularly at the local level, would be critical. Some religious groups and experts continued to state the new law was a step forward in certain areas for religious freedom. Some religious groups and experts expressed concern that a more precise legal approach and registration process could make religious operations, including registration of meeting points and clergy, expansion, and proselytization, more difficult. Some religious leaders and NGOs said they believed the new law would increase the difficulty of registering new religious groups, while others said the new law would help facilitate their registration. Multiple religious groups welcomed provisions reducing the waiting period for a registered religious group to obtain recognition from 23 years to five years. Religious groups and experts expressed concern over the size of fees in the draft decree on sanctions for noncompliance, which they said could be especially difficult for house churches and other small groups. Experts said granting religious groups legal personality was a positive step forward for religious freedom. Leaders of expatriate churches said they appreciated new provisions allowing them to register their congregations.

Religious leaders and academics said the new law enshrined in the country's legal framework significant restrictions and bureaucratic controls over religious activity. Many religious leaders expressed concern the law continued to give significant discretion to the government regarding approving or denying various types of applications. Some religious sources continued to say the new law was not in place to protect religious freedom but rather to serve and cater to the rules of the Communist Party. Religious leaders continued to note existing laws and regulations on education, health, publishing, and construction were restrictive toward religious groups and would need to be revised to allow religious groups greater freedom to conduct such activities in practice. Some religious leaders and academics said the law's definition of religion was not consistent with the ICCPR. These groups also stated the law should allow religious organizations to conduct activities without the need for government approvals.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On September 4, a group of approximately 10 armed individuals reportedly disrupted Mass at Tho Hoa parish church in Dong Nai Province to confront the priest over a Facebook post he had made urging political reform, according to media reports. According to reports from Catholic leaders, public security officials fined those responsible, although the parish priest reportedly said the authorities initially were unresponsive to the church and sympathetic to those who disrupted the Mass.

There were several incidents of harassment of Catholics by the progovernment group the Red Flag Association. On October 29 and 30, several hundred individuals from the association gathered in Song Ngoc parish in Nghe An, and outside the People's Committee Headquarters in Dien My Commune, Nghe An, to denounce Catholics. Two Catholic priests from the Vinh Diocese reportedly traveled to Dien My at the invitation of local leaders to discuss the harassment by the association against parishioners. The priests were surrounded by the group when they attempted to leave the meeting. Clashes between the group and Catholics reportedly turned violent on December 17 over construction of a new chapel in Vinh Diocese, according to state-run media and parishioners. State-run media reported that parishioners assaulted police officers, while social media and others reported plainclothes individuals assaulted parishioners under the direction of local authorities.

The Catholic Institute continued to meet at the Ho Chi Minh City Archdiocese's Pastoral Center located next to the St Joseph Grand Seminary, while discussing a suitable permanent location with the city government. The current venue has limited the institute's ability to accept new students' admission because it receives more applications than it can accommodate in the current space.

Catholic priests in Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces continued to help organize a series of demonstrations calling for stronger environmental protection and criticizing an international steel company over fish deaths and pollution along the coastline of several provinces in the central region. The priests also assisted parishioners in filing complaints and lawsuits against the government for financial compensation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In January the outgoing Secretary of State and Ambassador met with senior government officials and called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Other visiting senior U.S. officials raised core religious freedom concerns during their meetings with government officials and civil society representatives. The Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor discussed such concerns with government officials at the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in May. The Acting Assistant Secretary also met with a variety of registered and unregistered groups on the same visit. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom traveled to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in January to discuss religious freedom with local officials and a wide range of

registered and unregistered religious groups. Senior U.S. officials submitted to government leaders recommendations for revisions to the implementing decrees for the Law on Belief and Religion to bring the text in line with the country's constitution and international commitments to protect religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other officials at the embassy and consulate general urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate freely, including the UBCV, Protestant and Catholic house churches, and independent Cao Dai and Hoa Hao groups; sought greater freedom for recognized and registered religious groups; and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. Embassy and consulate general officials raised specific cases, including the deaths of members of religious groups in custody, as well as government harassment against Catholics, Protestant groups, the UBCV, independent Hoa Hao groups, the Duong Van Minh religious group, and ethnic minority house churches, with the CRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and provincial- and local-level authorities. U.S. government officials called for the increased registration of church congregations around the country and for improvement in registration policies to make them more uniform and transparent, including at large public events in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

U.S. government officials also urged the government to resolve peacefully outstanding land rights disputes with religious organizations.

The Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of government officials and CPV leaders, including the president, prime minister, and senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CRA, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and the provinces.

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officials met with religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious groups and attended religious ceremonies to demonstrate support for religious freedom. Embassy and consulate officials at every level traveled throughout the country, including to the Northwest and Central Highlands, to monitor religious liberty, meet with religious leaders, and stress to government officials that progress on religious freedom and human rights was critical to an improved bilateral relationship. Representatives of the embassy and the consulate general maintained frequent contact with many leaders of religious communities, including recognized, registered, and unregistered organizations.