

# VIETNAM 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom but, in practice, the government restricted religious freedom. Many requests by religious groups for registration remained unanswered or were denied, usually at the provincial or village levels. Many unregistered religious groups reported abuses, with a particularly high number of reports coming from the Central and Northwest Highlands. These included allegations of beatings, arrests, detentions, and criminal convictions. The government, however, registered an increased number of religious groups and generally respected the religious freedom of those registered groups, to the extent the groups complied with regulations. The government also permitted the expansion of charitable activities, and allowed large-scale worship services with more than 100,000 participants.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City maintained regular dialogue with senior and working-level government officials to advocate for greater religious freedom. U.S. officials communicated regularly with religious leaders, including religious activists under government scrutiny. The Secretary of State, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and other senior Department of State officials raised religious freedom concerns with government officials and called for continued improvements in religious freedom.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 92.5 million (July 2013 estimate). More than half of the population is Buddhist, with the overwhelming majority of those Buddhists (most of whom are of the majority ethnic group Kinh or Viet) practicing Mahayana Buddhism. Approximately 1.2 percent of the population, or about one million people, almost all from the Khmer ethnic minority group, practices Theravada Buddhism. Roman Catholics constitute 7 percent of the population. Catholicism is growing, with over 6 million adherents in 26 dioceses across the country. Cao Dai, a religion combining elements of many religions, is practiced by 2.5 to 4 percent of the population. Hoa Hao followers constitute 1.5 to 3 percent of the population. Estimates of the number of

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Protestants range from 1 to 2 percent of the population. Some Protestant denominations are officially recognized at the national level; others are registered locally.

Smaller religious groups that together comprise less than 0.1 percent of the population include 50,000 ethnic Cham, who mostly practice a devotional form of Hinduism in the south-central coastal area; 70,000 to 80,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country (approximately 40 percent are Sunnis; the remaining 60 percent practice Bani Islam); an estimated 8,000 members of the Bahai Faith; and approximately 1,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). There is one Jewish synagogue in Ho Chi Minh City serving approximately 150 Jews, mainly foreign residents who live in the city.

Other citizens consider themselves nonreligious, or practice animism or the veneration of ancestors, tutelary and protective saints, national heroes, or local, respected persons. Followers of these traditional forms of worship may or may not term themselves religious.

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'nong, among others). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and some laws and policies provide for religious freedom, establish freedom of belief and worship, and protect nonbelief; however, other laws restrict religious practice.

The penal code establishes penalties for vaguely defined offenses such as "attempting to undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious believers and nonbelievers." The government continues to limit the activities of unregistered religious groups and of individuals who are regarded as a threat to Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) authority.

The 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the revised Implementation Decree (Decree 92), which came into effect on January 1, serve as the primary

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documents governing religious practice. Both the ordinance and decree reiterate citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion, but warn the "abuse" of freedom of belief or religion "to undermine the country's peace, independence, and unity" is illegal, and religious activities may be suspended if they "negatively affect the cultural traditions of the nation."

The Government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) describes Decree 92 as a vehicle for adding administrative improvements to the original ordinance. The decree reduces by half the stipulated government response time to local and national applications for registration and recognition, streamlines laws and regulations, and addresses all forms of religious practice. On the other hand, critics of the new decree say the decree constitutes a further restriction on religious practice. Despite the shorter response time for requests, they note there are no penalties for late or arbitrary responses and there are increases in the number of approvals required, resulting in more local and national government involvement in religious activities. They point to added requirements governing foreign nationals involved in religious training, ordination, and leadership; additional management and curriculum guidelines for religious training institutions; and extended timeframes for recognition. Some Protestant house churches reported local authorities had used the decree to harass followers and exert pressure for the religious groups to cease religious activities.

Under the ordinance the government has control and oversight of religious organizations, which must be officially registered or recognized. The ordinance stipulates that "appropriate" lower-level authorities must approve leadership, activities, and the establishment of seminaries or religious classes. The appointment of priests or other religious officials requires approval from authorities only when a higher-level foreign religious organization, such as the Vatican, is involved. The ordinance explicitly bans forced renunciations of faith, stating "acts to force citizens to follow a religion or renounce their faith...are not allowed." The ordinance requires religious organizations to inform appropriate authorities of their annual activities or the investiture and transfer of clerics. It no longer requires official government approval of these activities, although some local officials require additional permissions. In addition, the ordinance encourages religious groups to carry out charitable activities in health care and education, which were limited in the past, but which now regularly receive administrative approvals.

Decree 92 prescribes a multi-stage process toward national recognition. To operate openly, an unrecognized religious organization must first register its places

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of worship, its clerics, and its activities in each local administrative area in which it operates by filing information about its structure, leadership, and activities. Local registration confers the privilege of operating in that administrative locality. The next step is national registration, which requires the group to document 23 years (20 years before the new decree) of stable religious operation in Vietnam. Some religious leaders noted government officials only began counting the time from the date the church was first locally registered, thereby rendering national registration impossible in the near term. National registration requires a license from the CRA. After maintaining national registration for three years, an eligible religious group can apply for full legal recognition after hosting a national convention to elect leaders. The group must receive government approval of its leadership, structure, and activities. Full recognition confers the privilege of opening, operating, and refurbishing places of worship, training religious leaders, and publishing materials, although local and national permission for specific activities is still needed.

For each stage of the registration and recognition application process, the government specifies time limits for official response (up to 45 days, depending on the scope of the request), and requires written explanations be given for any rejected applications. The law does not stipulate specific grounds for such refusals, and significant discretion is given to local and national authorities. Government officials rarely adhere to these response times and often do not include specific reasons for refusals. There is no mechanism for appeal in the ordinance, and an official may deny requests for any reason.

Decree 92 and the Law on Land stipulate religious organizations are not permitted to purchase land as legal entities, and provincial people's committees must grant the land and approve the construction of new religious facilities. Typically the land is purchased by a member of a congregation and then deeded to the province, after which the land is granted to the congregation. 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. The decree stipulates authorities must respond to a construction permit application within 20 days, although the law does not provide for accountability of authorities in complying with the deadline.

The national-level CRA is charged with disseminating information to authorities about the legal framework on religion at the provincial, district, commune, and village levels and assuring uniform compliance.

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The government recognizes 37 religious organizations affiliated with 11 recognized religions. The 11 recognized religions are: Buddhism, Islam, the Bahai Faith, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, the Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, the Four Debts of Gratitude, the Threefold Enlightened Truth Path, and the Threefold Southern Tradition. Individual denominations within these recognized groups also must be registered. Some Buddhist, Protestant, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao groups do not participate in government-recognized or government-registered religious organizations.

The law requires the Religious Publishing House, or another government-approved publishing house, to publish all religious books, following government approval of the content. Despite this provision, other publishing houses are able to print and distribute religious materials, and all bookstores are free to sell religious materials. The Bible is printed in Vietnamese and a number of other languages, including Chinese, Ede, Jarai, Banar, M'ong, and English. The government has not approved printing in modern H'mong, only in the less widely used traditional H'mong.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools; however, it permits clergy to teach at universities in subjects in which they are qualified. Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Bahai, and Buddhist groups are allowed to provide religious education to adherents in their own facilities. Religious groups are not permitted to operate independent schools beyond the preschool and kindergarten levels. Atheism is not taught officially in public schools.

Religious affiliation is indicated on citizens' national identification cards and in household identification documents known as "family books." In practice, many persons who consider themselves religious choose not to indicate a religious affiliation on their identification cards, and government statistics include them as nonreligious. Although regulations permit changing the classification of religious affiliation on national identification cards, most converts find the procedures overly cumbersome and are typically unable to change their classification.

The officially sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) incorporates Mahayana, Theravada, and Bhikshu Buddhism. The VBS is part of the mass political and social organization, the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), affiliated with the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). All Buddhist groups within the VBS are represented proportionally throughout the leadership structure and organization. In practice, Theravada monks meet separately to address doctrine, education, and other community needs within the VBS.

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Persons who belong to unofficial religious groups are not permitted to speak publicly about their beliefs, but some conduct religious training and services without harassment. Members of religious organizations not registered nationally may speak about their beliefs and may persuade others to adopt their religions, but only in locally registered places of worship.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of religious individuals and congregants being beaten, detained, arrested, imprisoned, monitored, and harassed.

Authorities have denied religious prisoners and detainees the right to worship, and, in principle, prisoners do not have the right to practice their religious beliefs or rites in communal prison spaces. There are, however, confirmed reports of some prisoners being allowed to read the Bible and practice their beliefs while incarcerated. Notably, Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, incarcerated because of his political activism, has been able to celebrate Mass and distribute communion to fellow prisoners.

The constitutional right to religious belief and practice continued to be subject to uneven interpretation and protection. Government practices and bureaucratic impediments restricted religious freedom. Unregistered and unrecognized religious groups were often subject to harassment, as well as coercive and punitive actions by authorities. In some parts of the country, local authorities tacitly approved the activities of unregistered groups and did not interfere with them. In other areas local officials restricted the same activities. Some unregistered groups moved towards national registration and recognition, but others chose not to seek registration, stating registration would give the government undue influence or control over their religious practices.

On June 25, members of the unsanctioned Pure Hoa Hao Buddhist Church stated that police had blocked followers of Vo Van Thanh Liem from worshipping at his pagoda in An Giang province. According to these reports, police beat, threw chairs at, and sprayed sewage on worshipers who were trying to attend the 74th anniversary of the founding of Hoa Hao.

On July 31, a group of Catholics stated police beat them and removed them from the area in front of a church in Ho Chi Minh City as they were praying. The group had travelled to the church from other southern provinces to pray after their land

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and property had been seized by local authorities. Several followers reportedly required hospitalization due to the beatings.

Local and national government regulators of religion continued to call for H'mong people in northern mountainous provinces, including Tuyen Quang, Cao Bang, Bac Can, and Thai Nguyen provinces, to disavow the small but growing Duong Van Minh religious group and dismantle any *nha don*, a public building used for funerals and other rites. National authorities issued directives to local authorities to put an end to the Duong Van Minh organization. Local authorities have established steering committees to implement the directives. State-run media said the authorities had been persuading the local people to dismantle any *nha don* while a number of blogs and news websites reported that local authorities had sent policemen to destroy a *nha don*, and intimidate and beat the followers. In October many H'mong people demonstrated in front of the prime minister's office, and law enforcement authorities temporarily removed and detained several demonstrators.

Individuals and churches affiliated with Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, including the Vietnam People's Christian Evangelical Fellowship Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Vietnam, reported police had prevented them from holding services. The government claimed Chinh had used his position to conduct political activities. Police arrested Chinh on April 28, 2011, for sharing his thoughts with foreign media outlets on political and religious issues and criticizing the government and communism. In July 2012, an appeals court upheld Chinh's 11-year sentence, announced in March 2012. Chinh's wife, Tran Thi Hong, and other family members report continued police harassment following his arrest and conviction. After Chinh's arrest, police followed and monitored Hong and family members. On April 12, Hong stated police had stopped her while she was on her way to visit Chinh in prison, and then beat her and searched her belongings. She also said police had locked her and the children in their house on September 25.

Authorities in An Giang and Dong Thap provinces and Can Tho City continued to harass and abuse followers of the unsanctioned Traditional Hoa Hao Buddhist Church and Pure Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. In September a court tried and sentenced Hoa Hao follower Bui Van Tham to two years and six months in prison for public dissent from the government and for organizing unsanctioned religious gatherings. Police had arrested Tham without a warrant in July 2012. In October 2012, police had arrested his father, Bui Van Trung, on the same charge, and a court sentenced him to four years in prison in January.

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On May 20, police arrested Thach Thuol and Lieu Ny, Khmer Krom Buddhist monks of a Theravada pagoda in Soc Trang province, along with Thach Phum Rich and Thach Tha, as they attempted to cross into Cambodia. The four had criticized the Vietnamese government's treatment of the Venerable Ly Chanh Da. On September 27, a court sentenced Thach Thuol to six years and Lieu Ny to four years in prison for "fleeing abroad to act against the people's administration."

In May 2010, there were reports of beatings and intimidation of individuals detained after they protested the closing of a cemetery in Con Dau parish. Although there were no reports of detention or harsh treatment of Con Dau parishioners in the three years since 2010, during the year there were reports of coercion and intimidation of the Con Dau families who were still refusing to move from the parish under a new resettlement project. Government officials in Danang City estimated the number of resisting families at nearly 30, while other sources cited 100 families.

On May 28, the Gia Lai provincial court tried eight defendants who were members of the Christian Ha Mon religious group, which the state had labeled an "evil cult" for "sabotaging the policy on solidarity." The provincial court sentenced the defendants to three to 11 years in prison. According to the indictment, one of the defendants said the Virgin Mary had appeared in 2002 in Ha Mon, a village in the Central Highlands where the government planned to build a hydroelectric plant. She called for local people to gather and pray at Ha Mon in order to halt Kon Tum province's plans to relocate local people and to reclaim the land from the hydroelectric project.

On April 15, Buddhists reported local authorities in Binh Phuoc Province had smashed Buddha statues located at a relics site. A leader of the provincial CRA stated the Binh Phuoc People's Committee had ordered the removal of Buddhist insignia because the government classified the mountain as a national cultural relic site and an eco-tourism site.

Plainclothes police frequently interrupted Falun Gong religious activity in Ho Chi Minh City parks.

On July 3, Cao Dai followers reported plainclothes police had raided a Cao Dai temple in Tien Giang province, attacked followers, and detained several members of the group. The followers said police had ordered them to transfer control of the facility to the state-run Cao Dai Executive Board.

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In 2012, Superior Buddhist monk Thich Khong Tanh organized a meeting at the unsanctioned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) in Ho Chi Minh's Lien Tri Pagoda. UBCV followers reported security forces had surrounded the pagoda and prevented a number of religious dignitaries, former prisoners of conscience, and wounded soldiers of the former Republic of Vietnam from participating in the ceremonies. Tanh said police blocked and arrested several people, preventing them from attending the meeting at Lien Tri Pagoda. In 2013, the pagoda was able to organize a charity event unhindered, but under police surveillance.

On July 2, airport police in Hanoi stopped Nguyen Hoang Duc, a Catholic literary critic, from attending the concluding meeting in Rome for the beatification of the late Cardinal Francois-Xavier Van Thuan. In 2012, international media reported Vietnam had revoked visas for a Vatican delegation planning to speak to people who had known the cardinal. Eglises d'Asie (Churches of Asia), the Foreign Missions Society of Paris information agency, stated the beatification plans had angered Hanoi. Thuan, the nephew of Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam's anti-communist first president, was forced into exile in Rome after he was freed from a Vietnamese detention camp in 1989.

On May 12, airport police in Ho Chi Minh City revoked the passport of Pham Dinh Nhan, head pastor of the unsanctioned United Gospel Outreach Church, and prevented him from leaving the country to attend a religious conference abroad. Police did not specify reasons for the revocation.

Religious believers, particularly members of organizations that had not applied for or been granted legal sanction, continued to report intimidation by local security officials about attending religious services. Harassment occurred in some cases when an organization attempted to upgrade its status by registering or applying for official recognition. In a number of instances, local officials forced church gatherings to disperse, advised or required groups to limit important celebrations in scope or content, closed unregistered house churches, and pressured individuals to renounce their religious beliefs.

On March 19, members of a Protestant denomination in Danang reported police had dispersed a "meeting point" (or house church) of nearly 30 deaf followers and escorted them to a police station for questioning. The members, affiliated with the unsanctioned Christian Mission Church, had reported no problems with authorities until they tried to register their meeting point.

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There were also reports of restrictions on religious celebrations or expression. While most Christian groups, especially those located in the larger cities, reported authorities had allowed them to observe Christmas, some unsanctioned groups in Binh Phuoc, Khanh Hoa, Bac Ninh, and Danang reported interference by authorities. The recognized Presbyterian Church of Vietnam in Duc Co District, Gia Lai Province, reported authorities had dispersed a small group on December 23. Also in Gia Lai province, Redemptorist followers reported authorities had prevented them from distributing blankets to the poor on Christmas Eve.

Leaders from the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) reported authorities in Binh Phuoc province had tried to close down hundreds of house churches affiliated with their organization because they were not registered. The SECV also reported local authorities had revoked the registration of a house church in Binh Phuoc without any justification, and then disrupted the church's activities and harassed its head preacher.

In January the CRA agreed in principle to the unification of the SECV and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) but rejected their application to organize a joint congress to unify the two churches in May. The request for unification was first made in late 2010. In October the ECVN reached an agreement on the process of unification with the SECV immediately after its 34th General Assembly in Hanoi. A similar agreement was reached by the SECV at its assembly in Ho Chi Minh City on November 11-15. Leaders of the two churches said they expect to hold their first nationwide joint assembly in early 2014.

During major Buddhist festivals such as Vesak, the Buddha's birthday, and Vu Lan, authorities banned UBCV pagodas from organizing services for the public in Ho Chi Minh City, Danang City, and Thua Thien-Hue, Quang Nam, Phu Yen, and Binh Thuan provinces.

Authorities allowed house churches affiliated with the Assemblies of God (AOG) in District 3 and Can Gio of Ho Chi Minh City to operate and granted registration to the AOG house church in Can Gio. The AOG, however, continued to face difficulty registering churches in northern provinces including Bac Giang, Thai Nguyen, and Son La. Some followers reported authorities had dispersed their gatherings, although no one was detained. Although the AOG received a national registration certificate in 2010, and held a required national conference, the government had not yet granted national recognition because it did not accept the AOG's charter and management structure.

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Adherence to a religious group generally did not seriously disadvantage individuals in nongovernmental civil, economic, and secular life, although unofficial policies of the CPV and the military often prevented advancement by religious adherents in the government and military. Practitioners of various religions served in local and provincial government positions and were represented in the National Assembly. Some religious organizations, such as the VBS, as well as clergy and religious followers, were members of the VFF. High-ranking government officials sent greetings and visited churches during Christmas and Easter and attended Vesak activities.

Most religious groups reported their ability to meet openly for religious worship had improved. The government, however, required the registration of all activities by religious groups and used this requirement to restrict and discourage participation in certain unrecognized religious groups, including the UBCV and some Protestant and Hoa Hao groups.

Religious activities were often subject to the discretion of local officials. In some cases local officials reportedly told religious leaders national laws did not apply to their jurisdictions. Recognized and unrecognized Protestant groups were sometimes able to overcome local harassment or to overturn negative local decisions after they appealed to higher-level authorities.

The government stated it continued to monitor the activities of certain religious groups because of their political activism. The government invoked national security and solidarity provisions in the constitution to override laws and regulations providing for religious freedom. This included impeding some religious gatherings and blocking attempts by religious groups to proselytize to certain ethnic groups in border regions deemed to be sensitive, as well as in the Central Highlands.

No new religious organizations received national recognition during the year.

Several hundred ECVN congregations continued to await action on their applications to register local meeting places. As reasons for the delays, authorities cited bureaucratic impediments such as failing to complete forms correctly or providing incomplete information. Local authorities also cited vague security concerns, stating their political authority could be threatened or confrontations could occur between traditional believers and recently converted Christians.

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In the Central Highlands, authorities granted registration certificates to dozens of SECV congregations, while the government granted registration to 10 in other southern provinces. More than 10 churches were built in provinces, including Gia Lai, Dak Nong, Quang Nam, and Dong Thap.

The CRA reported 115 new church congregation registrations – mostly in the Central and Northwest Highlands – compared to 20 in 2012, five in 2011, and 30 in 2010. Many of the newly-registered church congregations were part of either the ECVN or SECV.

The government continued to restrict the movement of UBCV leaders, although they were able to receive visits from foreign diplomats, visit other UBCV members, and maintain contact with associates overseas; however, government authorities closely monitored these activities. Provincial UBCV leaders throughout the southern region reported routine surveillance by local authorities. UBCV Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do stated authorities prevented followers from visiting him or regularly questioned them after any such visit, although he could meet diplomats within his pagoda. Authorities continued to ban the entry of Buddhist followers into UBCV pagodas. Authorities also banned some charitable activities by the UBCV Lien Tri Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City.

The Hoa Hao Administrative Council was the officially recognized Hoa Hao body; however, several leaders of the Hoa Hao community openly criticized the council as being overly subservient to the government. Hoa Hao followers in the Hue Vien Tu Pagoda in An Giang Province said the local state-run Hoa Hao Buddhist council had tried to shut down the pagoda because its followers opposed the control of the council. They further stated the council had requested the removal of all Buddhist statues in the pagoda and supported its closure for several months. When the followers protested by attempting to enter the pagoda, local authorities and police reportedly summoned them for questioning, although there were no reports of arrests. According to Hoa Hao and governmental reports, the pagoda was open, and local authorities and the former executive board were discussing plans for new board elections.

The government continued to say some Montagnards, an ethnic minority in the Central Highlands, were operating Protestant organizations which advocated separatism for ethnic minorities. The SECV and house churches in the provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Binh Phuoc, Phu Yen, and Dak Nong continued to experience government scrutiny because of perceived association with separatist groups overseas. Followers of the unsanctioned Church of Christ reported local

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authorities in the Central Highlands provinces had harassed and persecuted them. They said police had pressured the followers to abandon the church, and that police stated the church was connected with FULRO (Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées), which the government considers a minority separatist organization.

The Religious Publishing House did not act on a longstanding request by the SECV and the ECVN to allow printing of the Bible in the modern form of the H'mong language.

In March the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a circular, followed by a decision in October, clarifying procedures and proceedings for Decree 92. Many local committees on religious affairs also organized workshops for their officials and religious representatives to support effective implementation of the decree throughout the year.

The CRA organized a series of conferences, in conjunction with local administrations and religious communities, to review implementation of the religious ordinance over the previous eight years and to help revise the ordinance. The CRA acknowledged what it considered to be limitations in the existing ordinance, such as weak regulation of religious academies once they were established.

As in previous years, the CRA, in cooperation with the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), held three training courses with local and provincial-level officials and local church leaders in Cao Bang, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien provinces in the summer and fall. The training provided instruction in religious freedom and protection for religious believers under Vietnamese law, with a high rate of participation by local officials. More local officials participated in the training sessions than in previous years.

The government continued the positive trend of meeting with local and international religious leaders from a variety of denominations to discuss registration and recognition procedures.

Students continued to participate in training sessions on fundamental Buddhist philosophy organized at pagodas nationwide during summer holidays.

### **Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom**

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The government continued to ease restrictions placed upon most religious groups. The changes were primarily the result of further revisions to the legal framework, as well as a more positive government attitude toward Protestant groups.

The CRA reported government authorities had registered 115 church congregations during the year, a significant increase compared to recent years. Most of these church congregation registrations were in the Central and Northwest Highlands and included both Protestant and Catholic congregations. Many more registration requests remain unfulfilled, however.

Authorities further approved activities that had been prohibited in practice in the past, including the expansion of religious facilities and activities. In September the United World Mission Church began construction of its new, 6,000-square meter headquarters and theological institute in Danang City.

In June authorities allowed the ECVN to open a Bible school in Hanoi. According to church leaders, this was the first Protestant Bible school in northern Vietnam since the division of the Evangelical Church in 1954. The first five-year training course began on September 5, with 25 students

Authorities increasingly approved applications for religious training and celebrations. Several major religious events attracted large numbers of followers and participants. In March approximately 20,000 Buddhists participated in the Bodhisattva festival in Danang. In August an estimated 100,000 Catholics joined the Assumption Day celebration at the La Vang sanctuary in Quang Tri province.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City regularly raised concerns about religious freedom with a wide range of CPV leaders and government officials, including the president, prime minister, and senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CRA, the Ministry of Public Security, and other offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and the provinces. The embassy and the consulate general also maintained regular contact with religious leaders and dissidents throughout the country and routinely visited them.

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The Secretary of State, in meetings with senior government officials, called for continued improvements in religious freedom. Other visiting senior State Department officials raised religious freedom during their meetings with government officials and civil society representatives.

The Ambassador and embassy officers urged authorities to allow all religious groups to operate, including the UBCV, Protestant house churches, and dissenting Hoa Hao groups; sought greater freedom for recognized religious groups; and urged an end to restrictions on unregistered groups. The Ambassador and embassy officials raised specific cases of government harassment against Catholics, the UBCV, unrecognized Hoa Hao sects, and Protestant churches with the CRA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Public Security. The Ambassador also requested the government investigate reported abuses of religious believers and punish any officials found to be responsible. Embassy officials called for the registration of church congregations around the country. U.S. government officials also repeatedly urged the government to resolve outstanding land rights disputes with religious organizations peacefully.

Embassy and consulate general officials traveled throughout the country to monitor the religious freedom environment, 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 had frequent contact with leaders of all major religious communities. The Ambassador met with religious leaders of both recognized and unrecognized faiths, including the patriarch of the UBCV, the president of the ECVN, and the Catholic archbishop of Hanoi. Embassy and consulate general officers also met regularly with provincial representative boards of more than 25 Protestant groups from a wide variety of theological backgrounds, particularly in the Central and Northwest Highlands. The embassy and consulate general held several religious freedom roundtables during the year to receive updates from both recognized and unrecognized Protestant churches on the status of religious freedom.