

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

REFERENCE: UA VNM 8/2016:

31 October 2016

Excellency,

I have the honour to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 22/20.

In this connection, I would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information I have received concerning **numerous cases of harassment and violations of the freedom of religion or belief of independent religious communities in Viet Nam.**

Mr. Nguyen Bac Truyen is a human rights defender and independent Hoa Hao Buddhist, and has been the subject of an earlier communication (A/HRC/27/72, case VNM 4/2014 and A/HRC/28/85, VNM 11/2014).

According to the information received:

Followers of Duong Van Minh (DVM) in Cao Bang Province

A group of 200 ethnic H'mong adherents of Duong Van Minh belief in **Khuoi Vin Hamlet, Ly Bon Village, Bao Lam District** could not exercise religious freedom as they could not register their belief. One of their practices was to build a simple shed to store funeral objects. However, local authorities had repeatedly destroyed such sheds. On 14 October 2014, around 300 Government forces allegedly set the shed (the fourth one after three sheds were destroyed) on fire and aggressed on twenty DVM bystanders, among whom many were women. Subsequently, the believers rebuilt another temporary shed on 19 October 2014 and the Government forces went to destroy and set it on fire again on 6 February 2015. Besides, six people were injured and denied medical insurance because of their faith. Two victims who required emergency care had to pay the bills themselves. The DVM believers re-erected the sixth shed in March 2015 and the local authorities went to dismantle it on 21 May 2015 and confiscated all the wooden funeral objects: a cross, two tables, a toad and a cicada.

On 30 August 2015, a follower of DVM from **Na Heng Hamlet, Nam Quang Commune, Bao Lam District** was reportedly tortured and severely maltreated during two days of interrogation sessions with the Public Security agents in Ha Giang Town regarding his meeting with the delegation of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). His family could

locate his exact whereabouts on the day and he was transferred out with his head covered with plastic bags and black T-shirt to unknown location that evening. He was questioned in details about the meeting the rest of the time and forced to confess to wrongdoing for having met with foreigners and sign other documents, to which he refused since the content was unknown to him. He was released late afternoon on 31 August 2015.

On 9 December 2015, local authorities mobilized several troupes that consisted of 40-100 people to destroy the sheds for funeral objects almost simultaneously at four different locations: **Khuoi Vin Hamlet, Na Heng Hamlet, Na Than Hamlet and Phieng Roong Hamlet** that are all part of **Thach Lam Commune, Bao Lam District**. They also confiscated all wooden funeral objects of the DVM believers living in these hamlets.

Followers of Duong Van Minh (DVM) in Tuyen Quang Province

Local authorities destroyed another shed for funeral objects of the DVM followers on 29 August 2016 in **Thang Muoi Hamlet, Yen Lam Village, Ham Yen District**. During the raid, the Government forces brutally beat up and electrified villagers who were shielding in front of the shed to prevent its destruction. At least eight people were hurt during this incident while four were rushed to emergency care for having sustained severe injury.

Followers of Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province

After the decease of Venerable Thich Thien Dat in 2013, the local Government refused to transfer the ownership of Dat Quang Temple (located at **Hamlet 2B, Bau Lam Commune, Xuyen Moc District**) to the appointed successor/inheritor of the property since UBCV was not recognized. Instead, the local Government ordered for the temple to be handed over to the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha that is recognized by the Government. Against the order, the successor of Venerable Thich Thien Dat did not surrender the ownership. In 2014, he started building a living quarter for clergy of the temple by laying foundation for temporary wooden structure. Such construction would not usually require a permit but the Public Security Officers went to dismantle the wooden structure and took away all the materials, leaving only the foundation. On 6 October 2015, the local Government allegedly sent more than 300 personnel to dismantle the foundation in the temple. At the time of destruction, 10 members and monks of UBCV were praying and meditating in the temple. The personnel sprayed tear gas and aggressed on some of them. One of the victims was seriously injured and the hospital refused to produce the report of his injury. Many mobile phones of the victims were reportedly confiscated to prevent photos or videos of the incident to be recorded.

Followers of Independent Cao Dai (1926) in Tay Ninh Province

On 15 July 2015, independent Cao Dai followers from Vinh Long, Tien Giang, Dong Nai, Binh Duong Provinces, Ho Chi Minh City and Tay Ninh Holy Site Prefecture went to the house of a fellow Cao Dai in **An Quoi Hamlet, An Hoa Village, Trang Bang District** to attend the Rite of Installing Divine Eye Portrait. The police accompanied by dignitaries of Cao Dai Branch 1997 and others interrupted the ceremony. They beat up some forty independent Cao Dai followers, snatched their cameras and turned the place into chaos. They also confiscated the Divine Eye Portrait, altar bowl bell and wooden fish drum.

On 11 November 2015, another independent Cao Dai member in **Cam Binh Hamlet, Cam Giang Commune, Go Dau District**, organized a ceremony of Installing Divine Eye Banner at her home with about eighty other members. Members of Cao Dai Branch 1997 went uninvited and interrupted the ceremony with some other people. The Public Security agents reportedly did not stop the interference of the ceremony; instead they confiscated cameras and forced the homeowner to allow clergy of Cao Dai Branch 1997 to perform the ceremony.

On 12 November 2015, local authorities requested the daughter of a deceased independent Cao Dai member in **Truong Cuu Hamlet, Truong Hoa Commune, Hoa Thanh District** to let Cao Dai Branch 1997 to conduct the Great Acknowledgment Ceremony (marking final period of mourning for a deceased adherent) or bear the consequences. However, the deceased reportedly stated in her will the wish to invite the independent Cao Dai members to her funeral and the mourning ceremonies. On 13 November 2015, the Cao Dai Branch 1997 sent their people to the ceremony uninvited and ordered the independent Cao Dai members to leave. The ceremony was interrupted and many independent Cao Dai members were attacked while a few were detained until late evening before getting released.

Private home Evangelical worshippers in Dak Lak Province

Members of Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam in **Village Kroa 'B', Cuor Dang Commune, Cu Mgar District** increased over years from 30 followers to more than 100 people in 2014. They used to travel far from their village to a designated church in Cuor Village for religious activities but they did not have any means of transportation when the group grew bigger. Hence, on 10 August 2014, the group decided to split from the designated church and formed a small group worshipping together in private home. A few weeks later, the local authorities told them they were not allowed to worship in a private home or they had to go back to the designated church. On 12 September 2014, the leader of the group was called to the Commune Public Security Office and the People's Committee Office for a meeting where they pressured her to stop worshipping at home with others and threatened to dissolve the group for security reason as the Government prohibited them to worship in separate groups other than in the

recognized one. The local authorities called the leader to meeting on 19 September and 30 October 2014 again and insisted that she signed the “Giving up the Church” statement that she refused for the reason that the designated church was too far for them to go for worship and religious activities purposes. On 6 November 2014, the Cu Mgar District Public Security Office pressured the leader and her husband again to sign the statement of giving up the new worship group that they formed. Public security agents also brutalized her husband during the meeting. After they were released from the meeting, the public security agents reportedly visited their house every Sunday and hinder their worship whenever they gathered to pray. Agents in uniform and in plain clothes also routinely monitored them.

Followers of Evangelical Church of Christ of Vietnam (ECCV) in Dak Lak Province

Commune, District and Provincial Public Security Officers arrested a pastor in **Puan B (Buon), Ea Phe Village, Krong Pac District** on 27 August 2015. They forced him to stop all activities under the ECCV. The pastor was warned that if he continued to operate under this denomination, the Government would arrest and imprison all members of the denomination. At the same time, the security officers went to the relatives of the pastor to make them sign a report that indicated that the pastor had established an Evangelical Protestant organization that belonged to United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO). However, all family members refused to sign it and the pastor was released in late evening. On 5 September, the pastor was rearrested and had his laptop and mobile phone confiscated. A few days later, his brother - a missionary - was also arrested. The pastor’s brother was forced to recant his faith and forbidden from making any contact with other pastors in the country or abroad. Both of them were released on 14 September 2015 on the conditions that they would not work with or visit members of ECCV and that they would not have contact with anyone abroad or speak to Radio Free Asia. They were threatened that if they failed to meet the conditions, they would be jailed and would never see their wives or children anymore.

On 17 June 2016, another pastor of ECCV in **Ea Khit Village, Ea Bhok Commune, Cu Kuin District** was arrested for two days by the Public Security of Krong Pac District for questioning his participation in a prayer service in Kontum Province. He was questioned if he spoke to foreigners and was told to leave his Church that was not recognized by the Government. On 21 June, he was invited to another meeting with the Public Security in Ea Yong Commune and was again told to leave his Church that was considered to be a church of FULRO and return to Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam that was the Government recognized church.

Similar incidents happened to two other Deacons in **Cu Kuin District and Hoa Dong Commune** separately on 14 and 21 July 2016 where they were pressured to stop all their activities with ECCV. One of the Deacons was also questioned of his visit to Kontum and has been forbidden from preaching or gathering crowd at his house since the arrest. He would have to ask for permission from the Public Security to travel outside his village or commune.

Followers of Evangelical Church of Christ of Vietnam (ECCV) in Kontum Province

On 2 August 2015, four followers of ECCV in Kontum went to the house of church member in **Bi Village located in La Op Commune, Jagrai District in Gia Lai Province** for bible studies. Soon after their arrival, border guards from Station 17 stormed into the house and arrested all of them. At the Public Security Office, they were searched and had their mobiles phones and 10 million Vietnamese Dong in cash confiscated without record. Furthermore, they were all heavily beaten up and locked up overnight without food or drinks. The interrogations continued till 4 August 2015, when only two of them were released. The Public Security agents detained further the Pastor from Bi Village and the Deacon from Rac Village of Kontum Province.

On 7 October 2015, the Public Security Officers from **Gia-xieng Village of Ro Koi Commune, Sa Thay District** interrogated a pastor of ECCV about his church members and forced him to name all of them. He was also obliged to request approval before he travelled out of his village. Between 10 and 17 November 2015, the Public Security Officers appeared at different locations recording and taking pictures of the church members who assembled for prayers and bible study.

They also trailed and monitored closely the activities and whereabouts of each of the members and the pastor around the clock.

On 30 March 2016, a preacher and a member of ECCV from Kontum Province went to meet with an Official of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in Gia Lai Province. As soon as they reached Gia Lai Province, the traffic police stopped them, checked their personal documents and fined them 200,000 Vietnamese Dong without any reason. They paid the fine as they did not want to create more trouble or to be late for the meeting. Three Public Security Officers followed them, took photos of them and tried to stop them from meeting with the USCIRF delegation until one of the representatives of the delegation went to pick them up from the entrance of the hotel where the meeting was held. After the meeting, the traffic police again stopped and questioned them before letting them returning to their homes. On 12 April, Public Security officers of Sa Thay District and Ro Koi Commune summoned a pastor and the preacher to an interrogation related to their meeting with the USCIRF delegation on 30 March. They were questioned lengthily of the purpose of the

meeting, the content of discussion and the persons who introduced them to the USCIRF delegation before they were released.

On 23 April 2016, Public Security and Religious Affairs Committee of **Ro Koi Commune** went to a preacher's house and asked about the Easter celebration that took place, they demanded for number of participants, their origins, age and full names despite that the preacher had already submitted required information prior the celebration to the Government.

On 15 June 2016, some followers of EECV from Dak Lak Province joined a worship session in the house of a pastor in **Gia-xieng Village, Ro Koi Commune** but it was interrupted by Commune and District Public Security Officers who demanded the pastor to go for an interrogation session. The pastor refused on the ground that he was responsible for the worship session. However, the officers returned and interrupted several times the worship session. Subsequently, the militia, border guards Group 705 and many other Public Security personnel also appeared at the pastor's house, intimidating those who were present at the worship session. The pastor was questioned about the reason for which he did not register his visitors from other locations that was under temporary residency regulation; and he explained that the regulation did not require registration for one-day meeting. At the end of the session, public security personnel stopped two visitors from Sa Thay District and interrogated them at length before releasing them. The pastor was also called back for further interrogation where he was questioned about his study visit to Thailand from 23 to 27 March 2016 and more about the worship session. He was again told that his Church was not recognized and he could not invite visitors or conduct religious activities.

The pastor attended the ASEAN Conference on Religious Freedom and the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and People Forum from 1 to 5 August 2016 in Dili, East Timor. On 18 August 2016, the Public Security arrested the pastor when he was on his way to visit members of ECCV in Chu Se District, Gia Lai Province. His mobile phone was confiscated and the Public Security Officers screened through the content of his phone that contained photos of his trip to Dili and contacts details of members of ECCV and other documents regarding religious freedom and human rights. The pastor was told that he violated the Government's policy in unifying people and accused him of fighting against the Government; he was since detained and his family did not hear from him for days. His house in Gia-xieng Village was thoroughly searched on 20 August and the Public Security agents confiscated the computers and materials related to religious freedom and human rights. They also insisted to take away the "red card" from the family (Land ownership and/or permit to use the land) but the pastor's wife did not surrender it. Reportedly, the pastor's family lost 50 chicken and 3 pigs that night for unknown reasons.

On the same day, 20 August, the Public Security agents at provincial and communal levels also searched and confiscated items from the house of a member of ECCV in **Kram Village**, the house of a Deacon in **Rac Village** and the house of a Deacon in **Khuk Kloong Village**. People were forbidden from taking photos, recording or contacting others about the incident.

Following these incidents, the local Government organized public meetings on 23 August in **Gia-xieng Village** and on 25 August in **Khuk Kloong Village** dissuading the local villagers from following ECCV and that the Government would never recognize ECCV as it attempted to divide the people, harm national solidarity and oppose the Government.

On 5 September 2016, the wife of the pastor who was arrested on 18 August 2016 was stopped at Sa Thay District and invited to the District Office for an interrogation when she was on her way to visit the pastor in **Gia Trung Prison in Gia Lai Province**. She was told to declare everything that the pastor had done so that he could be released soon. She was unable to do as instructed as she had no information. Later that day, when she got to the prison, she was not allowed to meet with the pastor but could only speak to him on the phone for two minutes.

Followers of Southern Vietnam Evangelical Church in Gia Lai Province

On 2 October 2016, a member of Southern Vietnam Evangelical Church and his son in **Lop Village, La Le Commune in Chu Puh District** were arrested without reason by commune and district the Public Security. They searched his house and confiscated a smartphone and 5 Bibles. On the following day, his wife and his brother were arrested as well. On 7 October 2016, all the detainees were arrested except one. On 21 October, the last detainee was released but appeared weak and in bad shape as a result of severe beating that he sustained up during the detention. Reportedly, he was questioned about religious matters of Dega Protestantism and urged to confess that he invited all villagers to his house to join his worship group. He denied all charges and said that he only invited descendants in his family to join the worshipping at home.

Followers of Mennonite Church in Gia Lai Province

A Mennonite member from **Buon Tang, Phu Can Commune, Krong Pa District** was repeatedly called by the Public Security Officer for interrogations in 2010, forbidding him from travelling outside his community or engaging in any religious activities that related to the Mennonite Church that had links with overseas churches. In 2014, he was forbidden from proselytizing, performing communion, studying Bible, paying visit to fellow church members or bringing fellow members from foreign countries into his community. The authorities also forced him to leave his Church. On 12 January 2015, he was beaten up at the Phu Tien Commune Public Security Office and forced to sign a statement of giving up

his religion. Since then, they frequented his house and questioned him and his wife all the time about his activities. Out of fear, he had to flee the country with his wife; as a result, the authorities targeted and pressured his family members and relatives to not engage in any religious activities.

Followers of Presbyterian Church of Vietnam in Kontum Province

The members of Presbyterian Church in **BaRgoc Village, Sa Son Commune, Sa Thay District** faced discrimination and difficulties the practice of their religion. In 2013, the Presbyterian Church started constructing a prayer house but was repeatedly obstructed by local authorities even though the Government granted the Headquarter of the Church the required authorization. The local authorities insisted on further approvals to be obtained from the chiefs of hamlet, village and commune. Allegedly, after giving five million Vietnamese Dongs to the Chairman of the Commune as requested, the construction could carry on after a year's delay. On 12 January 2015, when the Government provided local assistance, Sa Son Commune notified the village chief that each family could receive three bags of fertilizer except for those who were Protestants. On 10 July 2015, the member of the Presbyterian Church was instructed to report to the authorities each time he leaves the hamlet or he would be punished. On 12 October 2015, the member was interrogated about the visit of his fellow church members to his area and their gifts of fifteen bicycles and rice to fellow Presbyterians. He was threatened that, even if his Church was allowed to operate, if he did not report all the church activities and visits by other fellow Presbyterians, he could lose his bicycle. On 19 October 2015, he was told to register all religious operation for the upcoming twelve months with full details, including those weekly worships, and religious rites. Failure to do so or to report any gift or aid he received would lead to suspension of all the activities.

Dismantlement of chapels of Dak Jak Parish of Diocese of Kontum

It was reported that after 30 April 1975 event, all religious presence was strictly forbidden in **Dak Jak, Dak Tuk and other villages of Dak Glei District**, there was no church or priest. Parishioners had to practise their faith at home or secretly. Despite the growing number of parishioners and services, only a priest from Kontum province was assigned from 1988 to 2004 and from 2004 to 2011 for performing sacraments when necessary. In the meantime, all the religious activities were held in open space or private residence.

Dak Jak Parish reportedly belongs to Diocese of Kontum, registered under Catholics Church of Viet Nam, however, Dak Jak Parish was not recognised by the Government; hence, it is not allowed to build any church or have a resident priest. It hosts a Catholic community of about 5059 parishioners, among which 4819 are Sedan, Ho Lang and Jeh ethnic minorities.

In April 2013, the Resident Priest appointed by Bishop of Diocese of Kontum and the parishioners built a simple structure as a temporary church (chapel) to allow congregation to be at least protected from sun or rain during services. In May 2013, the district Government of Dak Glei and Kontum Province in its decision demanded the Dak Jak Parish to dismantle the temporary church. The Resident Priest also received several times the eviction orders a few times from the authorities as he was not recognized by the local authorities.

On 7 January 2015, the local Government gave an ultimatum for the temporary church to be dismantled by 17 January 2015 and would expel the Resident Priest from the Parish, not allowing the presence of any priest in the Dak Glei district. Reportedly, 22 temporary chapels in nearby **Dak To District** under Bishop of Diocese of Kontum received similar orders for the temporary churches to be dismantled.

Catholic Prisoners of Nghe An Province

Between 1 and 14 January 2015, two Catholic prisoners in **Prison No.5 located in Lam Son Commune, Yen Dinh District of Thanh Hoa Province** went on fasting after several of their written petitions to request for Bibles were not responded to. Reportedly, the family members of the two prisoners had sent them the bibles in 2013 and they never received the copies.

Pastor of local churches in Dak Nong Province

A pastor serving the **Bon Dur, Bon Yok Rling and Bon Broih Churches in Krong Kno** was invited to interrogation at the local police station on 19 August 2016. He was questioned about his father's activities in the United States. He was also pressured to combine the three churches he was serving so that the local authorities could centralize control and administration of religious affairs. However, this was opposed by local villagers. Furthermore, he was investigated upon the resources he received to raise seven children (three biological and four adopted) and was suspected if he had received money from overseas. The pastor remained closely monitored by the local authorities after the interrogation.

Evangelical members in Dien Bien Province

On 24 April 2015, an Evangelical member and his wife were taken away by three Government officials and beaten up badly. They forced him to recant his faith. When he refused, they brutalized him further and threatened to kill him and his wife. After the incident, he and his family were expelled from **Ban Du O Village**. His family moved to another location with the help of local villagers on 30 April 2015 but on 27 July 2015, a large group of about thirty people surrounded the houses where they moved into and chased them away, claiming that the family

was not allowed to live there. They also grabbed some of the household belongings without accounting for them.

Confiscation of land belonging to Phu Phong Church in Binh Dinh Province

On 11 April 2016, the local Government of Binh Dinh Province allegedly confiscated 1000 square meters of land belonging to Phu Phong Church and planned to turn it into a community garden. Despite the protests from the Church and Binh Dinh Provincial representatives of the Evangelical Church Alliance, the local authorities went ahead with the construction of the garden. On 13 April 2016, complaints of the disruption of church activities and brutal assaults at church members by Public Security Officers were reported. The Church representatives expressed their concerns to the Religious Affairs Committee who visited the Church. It was requested that the safety and right of adherents be guaranteed and that the local government ceased its project on the recently confiscated land until the Central government and the Evangelical Church Alliance have reached a fair solution. Till date, no response has been received from the Government.

Followers of independent Hoa Hao in Dong Thap and An Giang Provinces

On 2 April 2016, it was the Memorial Day of Prophet Huynh's Victimization. The independent Hoa Hao Buddhists from **Dong Thap and An Giang Provinces** planned to organize a commemoration ceremony in **Quang Minh Pagoda**. However, two days before the ceremony, the local authorities started setting up checkpoints near their homes and monitored their movements. They were warned not to hold any ceremony at home or attend the ceremony in Quang Minh Pagoda. As many as thirty two independent Hoa Hao Buddhists who went to the Pagoda or left their homes were attacked, verbally abused and physically injured by Public Security agents. The authorities had mobilized about 200 agents on the day to block the independent Hoa Hao Buddhists from accessing Quang Minh Pagoda.

On 29 April 2016, some independent Hoa Hao Buddhists gathered to celebrate a death anniversary ceremony according to their traditions with reading of Religious Teaching from Prophet Huynh at the Bui Van Trung's Prayer Hall in **Phuoc Hung Commune, An Phu District** in An Giang Province. Two days before the ceremony, the head of the Prayer Hall was already told that only family relatives could be invited to such ceremony. Checkpoints were set up while local authorities harassed the family by inviting them to interrogations, confiscating their personal documents and mobile phones as well as demanding them to apply for temporary residence permit for all guests. The guests were also checked their papers and intimidated by raids, verbal abuse and insults. On the day of ceremony, the Government agents allegedly threw rocks at the Prayer Hall while there were about sixty independent Hoa Hao Buddhists who remained calm inside the Hall and continued their prayers. After the ceremony, traffic police and Public Security

agents stopped most of the guests on their way home. They were detained for interrogations, intimidated, insulted, assaulted, fined for illegal residence, and/or forced to sign a pledge not to frequent the Prayer Hall again. Some guests feared for their safety and stayed on in the Prayer Hall for weeks after the ceremony.

On 22 June 2016, the independent Hoa Hao Buddhists celebrated the anniversary of Hoa Hao Initiation Day in Quang Minh Pagoda. As in the case of the commemoration ceremony of the Memorial Day of Prophet Huynh's Victimization on 2 April 2016, they were prevented from attending the ceremony, resulting in two independent Hoa Haos being injured. The authorities used similar tactics in monitoring, blocking access to the Pagoda, intimidating and attacking at least twenty independent Hoa Haos who tried to attend the celebration.

Independent Hoa Hao human rights defenders in Ho Chi Minh City

On 19 September 2016, Mr. Nguyen Bac Truyen and his wife were attacked twice near their home. Four unknown men brutalized them and left without giving any reason. Mr. Truyen was a subject of communication twice in A/HRC/27/72, case VNM 4/2014 and A/HRC/28/85, VNM 11/2014.

While I do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, grave concerns are expressed at the allegations of intimidation, harassment of, and acts of violence against unrecognized religious communities. It is important to recall that the right to freedom of religion or belief, by individuals and/or in community with others, cannot be made dependent on any specific acts of administrative recognition or State's approval. Serious concerns are also expressed at the continued suppression and persecution of independent religious communities. Their rights to adopt or change, manifest and practice a religion or belief of their choice and to function as independent religious communities have been violated.

I am respectfully appealing to your Excellency's Government to clarify these allegations, especially of those incidents that appear to illustrate a pattern of reprisals against persons who sought to meet and cooperate with foreign diplomatic representatives. As the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) on 24 September 1982, your Excellency's Government has the obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief of all persons in the country, including those who belong to religious minorities or unrecognized communities as enshrined, inter alia, in Articles 18, 19, 20, 26 and 27 of ICCPR.

The full texts of the human rights instruments and standards recalled above are available on www.ohchr.org or can be provided upon request.

In view of the seriousness of the matter, I would appreciate a response on the initial steps taken by your Excellency's Government to safeguard the rights of these

independent religious communities as well as human rights defenders, in compliance with the international human rights obligations of Vietnam.

As it is my responsibility, under the mandates provided to me by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, I would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and any comment you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.

2. Please provide the full details of any measures taken to prevent acts of intimidation, harassment or reprisals against the independent religious communities and human rights defenders for their legitimate peaceful activities in exercising their rights to freedom of religion or belief and in cooperating with United Nations human rights mechanisms and other foreign diplomatic representatives.

3. Please provide the details of the progress made by your Excellency's Government in improving the situation of freedom of religion or belief of unregistered or unrecognized religious communities in Viet Nam following my country visit in 2014 and the implementations of the recommendations provided in my country visit report (A/HRC/28/66/Add.2).

While awaiting a reply, I urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person responsible of the alleged violations.

I intend to publicly express my concerns in the near future as, in my view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. I also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that I have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue/s in question.

Your Excellency's Government's response will be made available in a report to be presented to the Human Rights Council for its consideration.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Heiner Bielefeldt
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief