

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0216/04
by Marco Pannella (NI)
to the Commission

Subject: Violation of religious freedom in Vietnam

According to the International Religious Freedom Report 2003 produced by the U.S. Department of State, significant restrictions have been imposed in Vietnam on the activities of religious groups not recognised by the government.

The Communist Party has imposed severe restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of religious groups. In this respect, the Vietnamese Government has: 1) used judicial methods to control the religious hierarchies and organised religious activities; 2) repressed the religious organisation 'Assemblies of God' and forced its members into unemployment, forbidding their children to attend school and confiscating their property; 3) continued to isolate certain religious figures, restricting their movement and exerting pressure on their followers and relatives, as in the case of Thich Huyen Quang, the Supreme Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, who lived under conditions resembling house arrest between 1982 and March 2003; 4) used a noxious gas to disperse a gathering of Hmong Protestants in Lau Chau province in late December 2002, as a result of which one pregnant woman miscarried and other people required medical attention.

Similarly, the Hmong Protestants Mua Bua Senh and Vang Seo Giao were beaten to death by local officials in July 2002.

Moreover, cases have been recorded of people being convicted under Article 258 of the Penal Code (to up to 3 years in prison) for 'practising religion illegally'. Some of the judicial measures employed to convict religious prisoners violate international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Religious Affairs Office is violating religious freedom via the actions of government officials and the security forces, who have persecuted and arbitrarily detained people who practise religion.

U.S. embassy officials have informed the government that the lack of progress on religious matters and human rights is an obstacle to the full normalisation of bilateral relations.

The European Commission has urged the Vietnamese Government to show greater respect for political and religious freedom, but has taken no further action against it. Its position on this issue, which is simply to 'monitor the situation', therefore differs from the stance adopted by the United States.

In view of the above:

- Has the Commission taken any active measures in relation to respect for political and religious freedom, or in relation to prospective economic and social freedom, since the Joint Statement by the Commission and Member States at the Consultative Group meeting in Hanoi in December 2002?
- Has it given thought to and attempted to stop the abuses and restrictions on the religious freedom of individuals such as Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and Father Nguyen Van Ly?
- Has it reflected on the U.S. stance of designating Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern

under the International Religious Freedom Act should the government fail to improve conditions?