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VIETNAM | Hoa Hao Buddhists Sentenced

Six Hoa Hao Buddhists in Vietnam have been sentenced to up to six years in prison after holding a peaceful demonstration against suppression of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Bui Van Trung, Bui Van Tham, Nguyen Hoang Nam, Le Thi Hong Hanh and Bui Thi Bich Tuyen were sentenced to between three and six years in prison. Le Thi Hen was given a suspended sentence of two years.

The trial took place in An Giang Province on Feb. 9. All six were charged with “disrupting public order” under Article 245 of the penal code, and Bui Van Tham was also charged with “resisting officials performing their duty” (Article 257).

In April 2017, the six Buddhists held a peaceful demonstration after police prevented Hoa Hao Buddhists from commemorating the death of another member of the community at Bui Van Trung’s home. The police instructed men in civilian clothing to confiscate two motorbikes belonging to people trying to attend the commemoration. The same men beat Bui Van Trung’s son, Bui Van Tham, when he tried to intervene. Members of the community organized a peaceful demonstration to protest these actions and the authorities’ suppression of religious freedom.

Hoa Hao Buddhism is recognized by the Vietnamese government, but many Hoa Hao Buddhists refuse to belong to the state-sponsored Hoa Hao Administrative Council, which was established by the Vietnam Fatherland Front, a body under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s (CSW) research suggests that independent Hoa Hao Buddhist groups and their members suffer ongoing harassment by the authorities, including confiscation of land used for religious worship, intrusive surveillance and disruption of religious activities.

Several advocates for freedom of religion or belief and other human rights are awaiting trial, including Hoa Hoa Buddhist and legal expert Nguyen Bac Truyen, human rights defender and

Protestant pastor Nguyen Trung Ton, and Christian human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai. They are accused of “conducting activities aimed at overthrowing the state” under Article 79 of the penal code, a charge commonly used against activists in Vietnam.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “In 2014, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief stated that ‘serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Vietnam’, following a visit to the country. Sadly, this is still true today. The authorities continue to harass independent religious communities including Hoa Hao Buddhists, Protestant churches, and others. Those who peacefully oppose arbitrary interference are subject to beatings and arrest, and long-term advocates of religious freedom, like Dai, Truyen and Pastor Ton, are given lengthy prison sentences. We call on the Vietnamese government to cease all forms of harassment and intimidation of peaceful religious communities immediately, and to release all those detained in connection with their religion or belief, or their defense of this right.”