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Viet Nam/Cambodia: The Vietnamese Montagnard minority in urgent need of protection

Amnesty International today called on Viet Nam to immediately take steps to halt the repression of the Montagnard minority in the Central Highlands, and for Cambodia to honour its international obligations under the UN Refugee Convention by protecting those Montagnard people who have sought sanctuary in Cambodia.

"The Montagnard minority in Viet Nam have not only faced systematic repression since large-scale unrest in February 2001, but those fleeing have also been denied safe refuge in neighbouring Cambodia," Amnesty International said today in a new report *"Socialist Republic of Viet Nam/Kingdom of Cambodia: No sanctuary: The plight of the Montagnard minority"* (ASA 41/011/2002).

"Now is the time for the international community to put pressure on Viet Nam to address the grave human rights situation in the Central Highlands and on Cambodia to fully cooperate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in protecting these vulnerable people," the organization added.

In February 2001, thousands of people from indigenous minorities, collectively known as Montagnards, held protests in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam. The protests focussed on a number of grievances, including anger at government confiscation of their ancestral forest homelands, an influx of lowland Vietnamese settlers taking their agricultural land, lack of freedom of worship for the many who are members of unauthorised evangelical Protestant churches, and denial of basic rights including education in native languages. Some protestors also called for independence for the Central Highlands region.

"Since February 2001, the Vietnamese government has cordoned off the Central Highlands from the outside world and systematically arrested and repressed those they believe responsible for the unrest," the report said. "The Government also appears to be targeting Protestant churches and their worshippers".

"We believe that many of those arrested in Viet Nam are prisoners of conscience," Amnesty International said.

"Many hundreds have fled into neighbouring Cambodia and despite the efforts of the UNHCR, the Cambodian authorities have denied basic protection to many asylum seekers and colluded with the Vietnamese for their return to likely persecution," the Amnesty International report continues.

The report includes specific recommendations for the Vietnamese and Cambodian governments

as well as the wider international community for an end to the harsh repression of the Montagnards and protection of asylum-seekers. It urges access for outside observers and is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners arrested for the non-violent expression of their political or religious beliefs or for trying to escape Vietnamese government repression.

The report can be found at: <http://www.web.amnesty.org/ainsf/recent/asa41/011/2002>

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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