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VIET NAM: VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES WILL TRY BUDDHIST PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

Yesterday's announcement that the Vietnamese authorities will try Supreme Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang underlines the fact that freedom of belief and worship does not exist in Viet Nam, Amnesty International said today, calling on the Vietnamese authorities to release him immediately.

"The crackdown on the fundamental rights to freedom of belief, expression and association by the Vietnamese authorities is a clear violation of international law," Amnesty International said. "It's time for the Vietnamese government to take the human rights of its people seriously."

Thich Huyen Quang -- head of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam (UBCV) -- has been held under house arrest since 29 December 1994, and is to be tried in Quang Ngai province. Though the government has consistently denied he has been detained, Amnesty International believes he is a prisoner of conscience.

The news of Thich Huyen Quang's trial comes only one day after the sentencing of his deputy Thich Quang Do to five years' imprisonment on charges of "sabotaging religious solidarity". Thich Quang Do and five other UBCV followers, including three monks, were sentenced after a one-day trial held *in camera* in Ho Chi Minh City. In a separate case a few days before, nine dissidents were sentenced to long prison terms for attempting to organize a human rights conference in Viet Nam in 1993. They are also prisoners of conscience.

Both Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do have already served long periods of house arrest, and the recent trial is the latest event in a severe crackdown on the UBCV by the Vietnamese authorities.

Formed in 1951, the UBCV was prominent in the anti-war movement in South Viet Nam during the 1960s. It was banned by the communist government in 1981, but many members of the church both in Viet Nam and overseas continue to follow the teachings of its monks. Attempts by the Vietnamese government to control all religious institutions in the country have not deterred the UBCV followers from practising their religion.

Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do are both well-known for their outspoken views on religious freedom in Viet Nam, and they have both criticised the Vietnamese government over its human rights record. According to reports from the official Viet Nam News Agency, the third most senior monk in the UBCV, Thich Long Tri, who is also in detention is to be tried as well as Thich Huyen Quang.

The entire hierarchy of the UBCV in Viet Nam is in detention. Amnesty International believes these monks are detained solely for the peaceful expression of their religious and political beliefs and should never have been detained in the first place. It is calling on the Vietnamese authorities to release them immediately and unconditionally. ENDS\