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VIETNAM | Security Agents Assault Hoa Hao Buddhists

At least 14 Hoa Hao Buddhists in Vietnam, including one disabled person, were assaulted by security agents April 2 as they marked the anniversary of the disappearance in 1947 of Hoa Hao Buddhism founder Huynh Phu So. Three more attacks on members of the community reportedly took place in the days before and after April 2.

Every year on April 2, Hoa Hao Buddhists attempt to gather together at their places of worship for a remembrance ceremony. This year, Hoa Hao Buddhist followers in Dong Thap and An Giang provinces were followed and threatened by security agents starting March 30. Several were warned not to participate in the ceremony planned at Quang Minh Temple while others were subjected to abusive language and had stones and rotten eggs thrown into their homes.

On April 2, 13 Hoa Hao Buddhists came to the aid of religious leader Nguyen Van Lia, who was kicked and punched by unknown assailants on his way to the temple that morning. All 14 were then attacked by a large group of suspected security agents. One victim lost consciousness, while another, who is disabled, suffered a seizure as a result of the assault. Security agents would not allow him to be treated at a hospital.

According to the U.S. State Department, Hoa Hao followers constitute 1.5 to 3 percent of the population in Vietnam. It is most widely practiced in the Mekong Delta region. In 1999, the government established a council which was promoted as representing all Hoa Hao religious adherents. Many followers do not recognize the legitimacy of the state-sanctioned council.

Independent or unregistered religious groups in Vietnam, including Christians, Buddhists and others, are frequently harassed and intimidated by the authorities and those who have spoken out about these incidents have been subject to further violations. More information can be found in Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)'s 2014 Vietnam report.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW, said, "We are deeply concerned by reports that Hoa Hao Buddhists in Vietnam have been violently attacked by security agents simply for attempting

to gather together at their place of worship. After his 2014 visit to the country, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, expressed concern about the 'generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practicing religions or beliefs that are not registered'. CSW believes that registration should not be a prerequisite for the exercise of the human right to freedom of religion or belief and condemns the pattern of violations against unregistered Christians, Buddhists and others in Vietnam. We urge the Vietnamese government to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for all."