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VIETNAM | Interfaith Council Raises Concerns

The Interfaith Council of Vietnam has drawn attention to attacks on two of their members, who are both religious leaders, in a statement issued March 19 which highlighted a number of other cases of concern.

The cases of Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton and Father Nguyen Van Ly were among those highlighted in a statement from the council, posted on council member Thoai Huu Dinh's Facebook page.

Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton, a pro-democracy activist and religious freedom defender, was abducted Feb. 27. He and his friend were stripped, blindfolded and beaten before being left in a deserted area. It is believed that Pastor Ton was targeted by the authorities because of his campaigning. In 2011, he was arrested and charged with conducting activities against the State. He was released in 2013. In December 2015, he was arrested again and held in prison for a short time.

Former prisoner of conscience, Father Nguyen Van Ly, was peacefully protesting on environmental issues on March 4 when he was accosted by a group of thugs who forcefully confiscated flags and a banner from him. On March 5, two police officers visited Father Ly, apparently with the intention of preventing him from attending another protest that day. Father Ly has been mistreated by the authorities before and has spent more than 15 years in prison as a result of his religious freedom, human rights and democracy activism. He was most recently released from prison in May 2016.

Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton and Father Nguyen Van Ly are both members of the Interfaith Council of Vietnam, an association comprised of representatives from five religions present in Vietnam (Catholicism, Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Daoism, and Protestantism). The Council advocates for religious freedom, civil rights and democracy in Vietnam. The Council's

statement also condemns bans by the authorities on religious services by Hoa Hao Buddhist communities.

In other news, there have been reports that Catholic journalist and activist, Nguyen Dang Minh Man, was the victim of “repeated acts of ill-treatment” while in prison. She is currently serving an eight-year prison sentence and has been held in solitary confinement because of her human rights advocacy.

Her father, Nguyen Van Loi, told Asianews.it that “sometimes the prison guard slapped her in the face... At present, my daughter has to spend ten days of isolation in a small room, a very dark and smelly cell.” Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reports that Buddhists, Catholics, Cao Daists, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Protestants and Muslims are experiencing severe violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), ranging from harassment, intimidation and intrusive monitoring to arrest, imprisonment, torture and extra-judicial killing. The most serious violations tend to be against individuals who are both ethnic and religious minorities, particularly those in remote areas. However, the harassment and intimidation of established religious communities in urban areas is not unheard of, and religious leaders, lawyers and activists who defend the right to FoRB are especially targeted by the authorities.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “This important statement by the Interfaith Council of Vietnam emphasizes that severe freedom of religion or belief violations remain a major concern in the country. Some religious communities engage in activities which in other countries would be undertaken by non-governmental organizations, such as logging human rights violations and writing statements of protest against conditions in prison. Individuals engaged in these activities have often suffered restrictions on their own right to freedom of religion or belief as a result. We call on the Vietnamese government to cease immediately acts of violence and intimidation against religious leaders who have been involved in human rights advocacy, and against prisoners of conscience.”