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VIETNAM | Investigation Called for in Suspicious Death

In an open letter to the Vietnamese Minister of Public Security, over 30 civil society organizations, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), have called for an independent, impartial and effective investigation into the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyen Huu Tan.

Tan died within 10 hours of being taken into custody at a police detention facility in Vinh Long Province on May 3. The authorities claim that Tan committed suicide by cutting his own throat with a letter opener. However, his injuries, including bruising to the forehead, suggest that he may have been tortured in police custody, and other explanations and materials provided by the police as evidence of suicide are inconsistent and contradictory. Family members who have requested an investigation into his death have been harassed and threatened with arrest.

The joint letter calls for an investigation into Tan's death and for the prosecution of any individuals against whom there is sufficient, prima facie admissible evidence of unlawful involvement in the death. The authorities are also urged to cease their intimidation and harassment of Tan's family immediately.

Nguyen Huu Tan was a Hoa Hao Buddhist and the son of Buddhist monk Nguyen Huu Quang. Although Hoa Hao Buddhism is recognized by the Vietnamese government, 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. CSW's 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.

Tan was detained under Article 88 of Vietnam's Penal Code, an article with broad and undefined prohibitions against conducting anti-state propaganda, which is often levelled at petitioners and activists. His family has been the subject of ongoing harassment and

surveillance in connection with their affiliation with an independent Hoa Hao Buddhist religious group. Tan's father previously petitioned the government for the return of temple land confiscated and sold by the authorities.

CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "This is a shocking and tragic case which has had a devastating impact on Mr. Tan's family and community. The explanation given by the police is inconsistent with the circumstances of Mr. Tan's death. It is believed that Mr. Tan was detained in connection with his affiliation with an independent Hoa Hao Buddhist religious group, in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Vietnam has ratified. His death is the tragic outcome of his arbitrary and unlawful detention. The subsequent harassment of his family members is also unjustifiable, unlawful and inhumane. We call on the authorities to launch an independent, impartial and effective investigation, to cease harassment of the victim's family, and to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all."