

Activists rap Vietnam over religious persecution: Thich Nhat Hanh's followers expelled

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Human rights activists are criticizing Vietnam for expelling followers of a renowned Buddhist monk from a monastery, calling it part of a pattern of religious persecution by the communist government.

The criticism, from New York-based Human Rights Watch, echoes concerns raised by the U.S. embassy in Hanoi about the expulsion of the followers of longtime peace activist and Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh.

The monk returned to Vietnam in 2005 after 39 years in exile and opened the monastery with the government's blessing. But the monastery, in the southern Vietnamese province of Lam Dong, has attracted large numbers of followers, apparently fueling fears by authorities.

"The government views many religious groups, particularly popular ones that it fears it can't control, as a challenge to the Communist Party's authority," Elaine Pearson, Human Rights Watch's deputy Asian director, said October 19.

Police cordoned off the monastery on September 27, and undercover officers forcibly entered the monastery and drove 150 monks out, the advocacy group said.

The Vietnamese embassy in Washington maintained that the government respects freedom of religion. "Like in other countries, however," it said in a statement, "violations of law, which do harm to the national security, order and stability, shall be strictly dealt with by the laws."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has asked the State Department to include Vietnam on its list of countries of "particular concern" because of violations of human rights and freedom of religion. Vietnam had been dropped from the list in 2006. *-Religion News Service*