



Amnesty International

Group 524

March 2020



March Meeting Cancelled

Cancellation of March Meeting

In support of local efforts to limit the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, our March meeting has been cancelled. Going forward, the question of whether to meet will be considered monthly.

Since the founding of Amnesty International in 1961, much of the day-to-day case work has been done by individual activists, who write letters in their homes. As always, our newsletter includes a letter-writing opportunity – in this case, a model letter calling for the release of three human rights activists imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. See [Page 2](#), where you will also find a link to an online petition related to this case. For many other online actions, visit the AIUSA website: www.amnestyusa.org

Death of Thich Quang Do

Late last month, we learned of the death in Vietnam of **Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do**. For 10 years, our group had the opportunity to work for the freedom of this remarkable man – a revered religious leader and a world-renowned advocate for democracy and human rights. See [Pages 3-6](#) for a remembrance and an obituary for Thich Quang Do. We also have a link to a remarkable 2010 video (smuggled out of Vietnam) where he speaks about his efforts to promote free speech, democracy, and religious freedom. Please take a look at it!

New Prisoner Case

Kathy has just obtained from AIUSA a new case for our group to work on. For some introductory information, see [Pages 7-8](#).

Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.
Meeting Location: Providence Heights
9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Warren (jf.warren@verizon.net or 412-766-2506) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA website (www.amnestyusa.org) or the website of Amnesty International Group 39 (amnestypgh.org).



Saudi Arabia: Model Letter to Embassy in Washington

This model letter is adapted from a petition we have been signing roughly every other month, during our meetings at Providence Heights. Raif Badawi has been a prisoner since June 2012, while his sister Samar Badawi and her colleague Nassima al-Sada were arrested in July 2018.

On February 18th, Time reported that Raif Badawi's wife, who lives in exile in Canada with their children, is worried that something may have happened to him. She had been receiving daily phone calls from him, but in mid-January those calls suddenly stopped, and she has been unable to get any information about him from the Saudi authorities. Here is that article:

<https://time.com/5785742/raif-badawi-jailed-saudi-blogger/>

We can be reasonably certain that Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sada are still in prison. On February 24th, the Irish section of Amnesty International posted an online petition that calls upon the Saudi government to release those two women and other imprisoned activists. You can reach the petition via this link:

<https://www.amnesty.ie/saudi-arabia-free-saudi-heroes/>

Ambassador Khalid bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud
Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia
601 New Hampshire Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20037

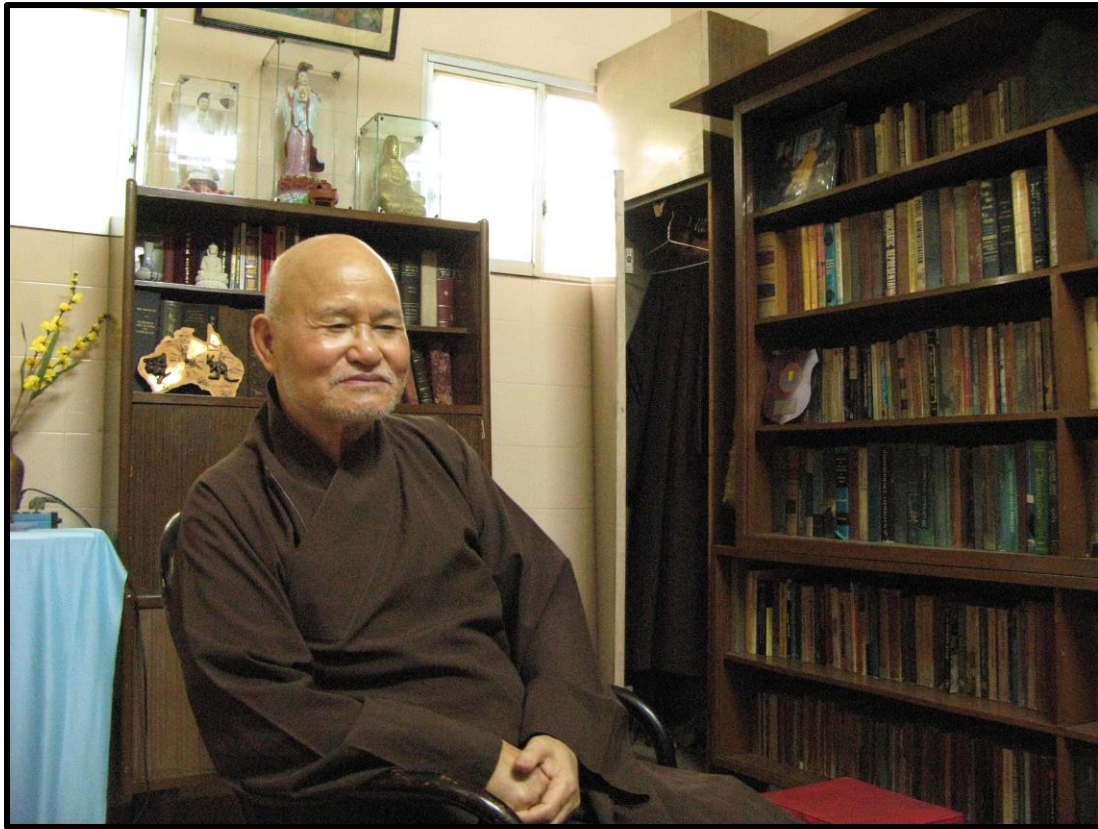
Your Excellency:

We are concerned about the imprisonment of **Raif Badawi**, **Samar Badawi**, and **Nassima al-Sada**. We believe that each of these individuals is a prisoner of conscience, held solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Each one should be released from prison, immediately and unconditionally.

Raif Badawi has been detained since June 2012, while Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sada were arrested in July 2018. They are three of the many activists in Saudi Arabia who have been persecuted for the "crime" of openly expressing their views.

Your government must stop arresting, charging, prosecuting, and sentencing your citizens for simply exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

Vietnam: Remembering Thich Quang Do



In May 2010, our group received the Amnesty case file for Thich Quang Do. Our activities on the case were coordinated by Kathy Herbst. In that role, she worked closely with Al Jacobson of Group 56 in Massachusetts, until his death in 2018.

Through Al, Kathy connected with Penelope Faulkner in Paris. She serves as vice-president of the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR), the organization which found ways to enable Thich Quang Do to share his message with the world, in spite of being confined by the Vietnamese dictatorship. For example, see the next page for a link to a 12-minute interview smuggled out of Vietnam in 2010.

Upon learning of the death of Thich Quang Do, Kathy summed up her thoughts in these words:

Last weekend we learned of the death of Thich Quang Do. Contacts that had been made by Al Jacobson of Group 56 emailed us with the news. In keeping with Thich Quang Do's wishes, however, they made no official statement.

Because of our work, we knew that his freedom was still restricted, although the pressure was more subtle, and many in the international community believed that the government had ceased its persecution.

It has been a privilege to work for the freedom of Thich Quang Do. His courage and wisdom are a continuing inspiration.



Vietnam: Remembering Thich Quang Do (continued)

Video Interview with Thich Quang Do

In the spring of 2010, a small camera crew from the Oslo Freedom Forum made a covert trip to Vietnam. They managed to slip into the compound where Thich Quang Do was confined, recorded a 12-minute interview in English, and ultimately smuggled the video back to Oslo. The video was then posted to Youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIq7q06bpWU>

Obituary for Thich Quang Do

This excellent obituary by Seth Mydans was published in the New York Times on Feb. 24th. It also appeared in the Post-Gazette.

Thich Quang Do, Defiant Rights Champion in Vietnam, Dies at 91

**As the patriarch of a banned Buddhist church,
he endured prison, house arrest, and internal exile,
but refused to bend to the Communist authorities.**

Thich Quang Do, the patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and a defiant champion of religious freedom, democracy and human rights in his country, died on Saturday, February 22. He was 91.

His death was confirmed by the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau, an arm of his church. There was no information on where he died. A spokeswoman for the organization said that the Vietnamese authorities had held him incommunicado at the Tu Hieu Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City and that it had been impossible for members of his organization to make contact with him. He had diabetes and a heart condition for many years, she added.

Thich Quang Do had for decades repeatedly challenged, and angered, the Communist government on issues of religious and political freedom, and had effectively been under house arrest since 2003. He had spent the last 30 years or so in and out of prison, under house arrest, or forced into internal exile for refusing to submit the Unified Church to government control.

He issued a stream of public statements over the years, putting him in the forefront of religious activism in Vietnam, which permits only a single government-sanctioned Buddhist organization. The Unified Church, founded as an umbrella organization for various Buddhist sects in 1964, was banned.

His themes were as much secular as religious, echoing some of the main concerns of political dissent in Vietnam. One such statement, delivered in a video message to the United Nations in 2005, amounted to a political manifesto.



Vietnam: Remembering Thich Quang Do (continued)

The statement said: “Without democracy and pluralism we cannot combat poverty and injustice, nor bring true development to our people. Without democracy and pluralism we cannot guarantee human rights, for human rights cannot be protected without the safeguards of democratic institutions and the rule of law.”

In 2001, Thich Quang Do published “Appeal for Democracy in Vietnam,” an eight-point declaration calling for a multiparty system, free elections, independent trade unions and the abolition of “all degrading forms of imported culture and ideologies that pervert Vietnamese spiritual and moral values.”

He was instrumental in forging links between dissidents in the north and south, ending a decades-long geographical and ideological divide. As well, he was a respected scholar, with more than a dozen published works, including novels, poetry, translations and studies of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Thich Quang Do received a number of human rights awards, including Norway’s Rafto Prize, which cited “his personal courage and perseverance through three decades of peaceful opposition against the Communist regime in Vietnam.”

In 1978, he and Thich Huyen Quang, the patriarch of the Unified Church at the time, were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Irish peace activists Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire, the 1976 laureates.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent body established by Congress, spoke out on Thich Quang Do’s behalf in 2018. Its vice-chairwoman at the time, Kristina Arriaga, said, “I urge the government of Vietnam to respect his freedom of movement and freedom to reside wherever he chooses.”

Thich Quang Do was born Dang Phuc Tue, on November 27, 1928, in Thai Binh Province, in northern Vietnam. He assumed the Dharma name Thich Quang Do after becoming a monk at the age of 14. Thich is an honorary family name used by monks and nuns.

He said his life’s course was set at the age of 17, when he witnessed the execution of his religious master, Thich Duc Hai, by a Communist revolutionary tribunal. “Then and there, I vowed to do all that I could to combat fanaticism and intolerance and devote my life to the pursuit of justice through the Buddhist teachings of nonviolence, tolerance and compassion,” he wrote in 1994, in an open letter to Do Muoi, the general secretary of Vietnam’s Communist Party at the time.

He added: “Little did I realize how that simple vow would lead me down a path paved with prison cells, torture, internal exile, and detention for so many years to come.”

In the early 1950s, Thich Quang Do traveled for six years as a young research fellow in Buddhist philosophy at universities in India and Sri Lanka. In the 1960s and ’70s, he was a professor of oriental studies and Buddhist philosophy at universities in Vietnam.



Vietnam: Remembering Thich Quang Do (continued)

He and thousands of Buddhists were arrested in 1963 in a broad crackdown by the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, but he was released a few months later when Diem was deposed and assassinated in a military coup.

The Communist side won the Vietnam War in 1975, and two years later Thich Quang Do was put in solitary confinement for his attempts to organize a nonviolent struggle to protect religious freedom. Beginning in the 1980s he spent a decade in internal exile as punishment for his activism and public statements. His 84-year-old mother was exiled with him, and died in 1985 from malnutrition and inadequate medical care.

In a turnaround, the Communist government in 1990 invited him to take up a post in the state-sponsored Vietnam Buddhist Church, but he refused and continued his opposition.

In April 2006, in the early years of his final term of house arrest, he predicted the ultimate victory of his secular ideals.

“There will come a time when the authorities will be unable to silence all of the people all of the time,” he said. “The moment will come when the people will rise up, like water bursting its banks,” and when that happens, he added, “the situation in Vietnam will be forced to change, and a democratic process will emerge.”



China: New Amnesty Case File – Guligeina Tashimaimaiti

Case Summary

Guligeina Tashimaimaiti, a woman in her early thirties, is a member of the Uighur ethnic group native to northwest China. From the AIUSA website, we have a brief summary of her case. Next month we will have much more detail about the case, and a photograph of Guligeina.

Guligeina Tashimaimaiti, a PhD student at the University of Technology in Malaysia, was last seen by a friend on December 26, 2017, Malaysia's Senai International Airport. She was flying back to China to check on her parents, whom she had not been able to contact since her last trip home, ten months earlier.

Because friends and family had warned her about the danger of returning to Xinjiang, she had told a friend that each week she would change her profile photo on WeChat (a popular Chinese social media platform), to signal that she was safe.

She changed her profile photo one week after her return home to Yili in Xinjiang. However, the profile photo remained the same for a couple of weeks after that, until one day it suddenly changed to a black and white photo of something that looked like a prison cell. Her friends and family fear that she might have been detained in a "re-education" camp.

Background on Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

This background narrative on Xinjiang came from the AIUSA website.

Located in China's far northwest, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) is a huge, sparsely populated area encompassing vast semi-desert steppes in the north and severe desert basins ringed by historic oasis towns in the south. More than half of the region's population of 22 million people belong to mostly Turkic and predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, including Uighurs (around 11.3 million), Kazakhs (around 1.6 million) and other populations whose languages, cultures and ways of life vary distinctly from those of the Han, who are the majority in "interior" China.

Rich in coal, natural gas and oil, and sharing borders with eight different countries, Xinjiang is intertwined with many of China's economic, strategic and foreign policy goals. But decades of inter-ethnic tensions have led to cycles of sporadic violence and heavy-handed repression. China's leaders now consider stability in Xinjiang vital to the success of the "Belt and Road Initiative," a massive global infrastructure development program aimed at strengthening China's links to Central Asia and beyond.

Since 2017, disturbing details have emerged from the region describing intrusive surveillance, arbitrary detention, political indoctrination, and forced cultural assimilation being carried out there on a massive scale and targeting the region's Uighurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim peoples. In concluding observations to its August 2018 review of China, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed alarm about reports of arbitrary, prolonged and incommunicado mass detention of Uighurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities under the pretext of countering terrorism and religious extremism.



China: New Amnesty Case File – Guligeina Tashimaimaiti (continued)

“Vocational Training Centers”

Mass detention camps began making their appearance locally in 2014, spreading rapidly throughout Xinjiang after the adoption of regional “Regulations on De-Extremification” in March 2017. The goal of these facilities appears to be replacement of religious affiliation and ethnic identity with secular, patriotic political allegiance.

The Chinese government initially denied their existence, but their construction has been documented by recruitment and procurement documents and satellite imagery. Eventually, it acknowledged their existence but claimed that they were voluntary “vocational training centers.”

No one knows exactly how many people have been detained since the crackdown began. One widely accepted estimate, published in May 2018, put the total number of detained at “anywhere between several hundred thousand and just over one million.”

Those sent to detention camps are not put on trial; they have no access to lawyers, and have no right to challenge the decision. Detentions are apparently open-ended and can last weeks, months – possibly even years. Because there is no fixed “sentence,” the authorities are left to decide when an individual has been satisfactorily “educated.”

According to those who have spent time in these centers, life inside for detainees is subject to a harsh discipline all but indistinguishable from that in formal detention facilities. They are lectured about the dangers of “religious radicalism,” made to study Chinese, and forced to memorize legal provisions and patriotic songs and write “self-criticisms” that are key to determining whether they have been sufficiently “educated” for release.

Those who resist or fail to show enough progress reportedly face punishments ranging from verbal abuse to food deprivation, solitary confinement, beatings and use of restraints and stress positions – likely to amount to violations of the absolute prohibition under international law of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. There have been reports of deaths inside the facilities, including suicides of those unable to bear the mistreatment.

China has rejected calls from the international community, including Amnesty International, for it to allow independent experts unrestricted access to Xinjiang. Instead, China has made efforts to silence criticism by inviting delegations from different countries to visit Xinjiang for carefully orchestrated and closely monitored tours.