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PRESS RELEASE

The Rafto Prize 2006 for Vietnamese human rights defender

The board of the Rafto Foundation has decided to award the 2006 Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize to one of Vietnam's most prominent defenders of democracy, religious freedom and human rights: Venerable Thich Quang Do. He receives the prize for his personal courage and perseverance through three decades of peaceful opposition against the communist regime in Vietnam, and as a symbol for the growing democracy movement in the country.

Thich Quang Do is an intellectual leader and a unifying force in his home country. A monk, researcher and author, he has devoted his life to the advancement of justice and the Buddhist tradition of non-violence, tolerance and compassion. Through political petitions Thich Quang Do has challenged the authorities to engage in dialogue on democratic reforms, pluralism, freedom of religion, human rights and national reconciliation. This has provided force and direction to the democracy movement. But he has paid a high price for his activism. Thich Quang Do has spent a total of 25 years in prison and today, at 77, he is still under house arrest. From here he continues the struggle. As deputy leader of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thich Quang Do is strongly supported by Vietnam's numerous Buddhists. He also receives broad support from other religious communities as well as from veterans of the Communist Party. Thich Quang Do plays a key role in the work of reconciling dissidents from North and South Vietnam.

With this award the Rafto Foundation wishes to express its support for all Vietnamese who are fighting for a peaceful transition to democracy. Since April of this year, more than 2.000 citizens have signed the petitions "Appeal for Freedom of Political Association" and the "Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam". The petitions demand respect for basic rights, political pluralism, freedom of religion and freedom of association. This is the first time in recent years that so many people have signed on to public petitions. The petitions are signed by a wide array of Catholic priests, Buddhist monks, former political prisoners, former Communist Party officials, veterans, academics, teachers, nurses, engineers, writers, businesspeople and many ordinary citizens. In Vietnam, the mere act of signing such documents may lead to harassment, detention and often imprisonment.

Vietnam is working to increase its international legitimacy and has applied for membership in the World Trade Organisation. (WTO). The economy is liberalized, but the country has retained an authoritarian regime. The one-party state does not tolerate dissenting views or criticism from the media, political parties, religious organisations or labour unions, despite the country's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Hundreds of political and religious dissidents remain in prison. Prison conditions are in breach of international standards and there is evidence of torture and mistreatment. Prisoners are kept in isolation in cramped, dark, unsanitary cells. There are reports of prisoners being beaten, kicked and hit with electric shock batons. Arrest without a warrant is common and the judicial system is vulnerable to political pressure. Defendants often do not have access to independent legal counsel. Trials are closed to the public and the media, often also to the family of the accused.

The new prime minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung, recently promised to increase the pace of reform aimed to build a state that is governed by law and committed to democracy. This promise must now be followed by concrete action. The Rafto Foundation calls on the Vietnamese government to stop their attacks on dissidents and enter into a dialogue with the democratic opposition on reforms opening for participation and respect for human rights, freedom of belief and political liberty in Vietnam.

The Rafto Prize 2006 is awarded at Den Nationale Scene in Bergen Saturday November 4th at 13.00.

The Rafto Prize was established after the death of professor Thorolf Raftos in 1986, in gratitude to his longstanding work to help people who are repressed and persecuted, and in the realization that this work must be ongoing. Every year the Rafto Foundation awards the Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize (The Rafto Prize). This is a human rights award gaining international status, among other, several Rafto laureates, Aung San Suu Kyi, José Ramos-Horta, Kim Dae-Jung and Shirin Ebadi, have subsequently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Rafto Prize contributes to a focus on human rights violations and on people and communities which need the attention of the world. This year the Rafto Foundation is marking 20 years of work for human rights. On this occasion, all previous Rafto laureates are invited to Bergen.

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