

# VIETNAM



VIETNAM, OFFICIALLY THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM, HAS EXPERIENCED WARFARE DURING MOST OF THE LAST CENTURY. NOW AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF ASEAN, IT IS REBUILDING ITS ECONOMY. THERE ARE FEW CHRISTIANS AND MANY RESTRICTIONS ON THE CHURCH.

## population

- Population: 81 million
- Density: 239 per sq km

The population of Vietnam is young: 33 percent are under 14 years of age. Around 88 percent are Vietnamese. Possibly 2 million people have left Vietnam since 1975.

## religions

- Buddhist 54%
- Non-religious/other 22%
- Chinese/Animist/New religions 15.3%
- Christian 8% [evangelicals 1%]
- Muslim [Cham] 0.7%

Traditional Vietnamese religion included elements from Indian beliefs and three Chinese religious systems: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

## language

Vietnamese is the national language. There are also 80 ethnic minorities with their own languages.

## geography

Vietnam occupies the easternmost part of the Indochinese Peninsula; a rugged, elongated S-shaped strip of mountains, coastal plains and river deltas. It is bordered by China to the north, Cambodia and Laos to the west and the South China Sea to the east.

## climate

In the north, especially in the interior, the temperatures are subtropical, with dry winters and wet summers. The

south is hotter than the north, with a rain-filled monsoon climate in the southeast.

## history

The early peoples of North Vietnam were perhaps the first in East Asia to practice agriculture and formed a fairly advanced civilization.

From 200 BC until 1000 AD, North Vietnam was a reluctant province of China. Chinese culture became and remains an integral part of Vietnamese life. From 1000-1800, Vietnam became a dynamic force in East Asia. After consolidating its position in the north, the dynastic leaders cast greedy eyes south to the fertile Mekong Delta. From the 15th to 17th centuries, the North Vietnamese marched south to swallow the Champa Kingdom and inhabit the lower Mekong Delta.

The North and South Vietnamese were at odds with each other through the ensuing centuries. Rivalry between them was sharpened with the arrival of the Europeans in Southeast Asia, and the country collapsed into vast rice lands controlled by grasping feudal lords.

In 1862 the French acquired the Mekong Delta and 20 years later they extended their protectorate over the whole nation. Although there was little initial resistance, anti-colonial feeling swelled. In the 1920s nationalist parties demanding independence were formed. In 1930 Ho Chi Minh formed the Indo-Chinese Communist Party.

It wasn't until the end of the Second

World War that reform became possible. The Japanese occupation of the country during the war left a vacuum in 1945 which the French tried again to fill. The First Indo-Chinese War broke out between them and the Vietminh [The League for the Independence of Vietnam], ending in 1954. The settlement divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with the Vietminh in the north and the French and their Vietnamese supporters in the south.

The increasingly Communist north resumed the conflict in 1963 [the Second Indo-Chinese War]. Two years later, President Lyndon Johnson sent in American troops to support the anti-Communist south. The war continued until 1975 when the northern armies overran Saigon. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was formed.

However, the end of the war did not signal the end of violence. Tensions with Cambodia escalated, and in 1979 the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and installed a pro-Vietnamese government that lasted ten years. A few weeks after attacking Cambodia, Vietnam was itself attacked by its Communist neighbor and erstwhile benefactor, China. Troops were also stationed in Laos.

In the early 1990s the government sought to improve its foreign relations and to encourage foreign investment. The country signed a peace agreement with Cambodia in 1991 and shortly thereafter restored diplomatic relations with China. The U.S. removed a trade embargo in 1994, and full diplomatic relations were established in 1997.



10 W, Dry Creek Circle, Littleton, CO 80120-4413  
Tel.: 303.730.4160 E-mail: info@omf.org  
Website: www.us.omf.org

Vietnam today is an active member of the Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN]. It hosted the South East Asian Games in 2003, winning the most medals, and is among the world's top exporters of rice and coffee. It is becoming common to see "made in Vietnam" on products in the West.

## christianity

European missionaries introduced Roman Catholicism into Vietnam in the 16th century. The majority of Christians in the country today are Catholic. A Protestant church has existed in Vietnam for nearly one hundred years. Missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance [C&MA] began work in Vietnam in 1911. By 1929 their work resulted in the establishment of an independent Evangelical Church of Vietnam. Other missionary societies gradually joined in the work of church

planting in Vietnam and by the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 there were 154,000 evangelical Christians, many of them belonging to underground churches which had sprung up alongside the "open" Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

The government of the unified Communist Vietnam ordered all the missionaries to leave, and for the next ten years few foreigners were able to enter the country until the change of economic policy, *doi moi* [renovation], came into effect.

Although the Communists closed half the 600 church buildings that existed when they took over, the church has grown significantly. In 1975 there were around 150,000 evangelicals, but this rose to an estimated 1.2 million in 2002.

With growth has come increasing



persecution, however, as Christians were seen as counter-revolutionary and a potential threat to the authorities.

Pastors and lay people alike have been imprisoned, particularly among the underground church, comprising the tribal hill churches and unregistered house churches. Christians tend to be treated as second class citizens.

Government restrictions are most severe in the north, where there are only about 15 registered (or open) churches, and in Hanoi, the capital, where there is only one. In the south of the country there are fewer government restrictions, with about 285 open churches, 40 of them in Ho Chi Minh City.

Bibles are now obtainable in Vietnam [including a recently-published new version], as is the *Jesus* film, but commentaries, children's materials and other books are in short supply. Translation of suitable literature into Vietnamese is being undertaken and secretly printed and distributed.

In 2003 permission was given to re-open the first Bible college (after a 27-year wait), and 50 students are training to be pastors there. Other church leaders are trained, unobtrusively, through such programs as Theological Education by Extension.

The desperate need for economic development and trade has brought opportunities for people with skills in many professions, especially English teaching. Many development and aid agencies are serving the country. Already two small but growing OMF teams are involved as professionals working in North and South Vietnam. The door is wide open and Christian professionals are urgently needed.

## how to pray

- Repression of religious, economic and political freedoms continues, but thank God that the church has grown and continues to grow steadily, although it is still small.
- Pray that the government may give a free reign to pastors and believers in the registered churches to expand their Christian activities and lift the harsh restrictions on religious activities.
- Unregistered churches are harried by police, with meetings frequently broken up and leaders arrested. Pray for pastors and believers.
- Pray for unity between leaders of registered and unregistered churches.
- Leadership training is urgently needed. Many pastors are old, and younger churches are often led by those with little opportunity for theological study. They are therefore susceptible to error or bias in their teaching.
- Pray for more study materials, theological books and commentaries to be imported. Christian literature production is strictly monitored.
- Bibles are printed and available for purchase in Vietnam. Pray for increased production and distribution.
- Pray that suitable people will take up the opportunities to work in Vietnam in development and professional work.

Many sections of the community and numerous ethnic groups remain scarcely touched by the gospel. Pray for:

- The Muslim Cham and Buddhist Khmer of the Mekong Delta.
- The northern ethnic minorities, which have been beyond the reach of missionaries for 50 years because of war and Communism. A few of these groups are now hearing and responding to the gospel in small numbers. The Hmong are particularly responsive. In 1975 there were no known believers. Today, thanks mainly to their response to Christian radio broadcasts, over 150,000 Hmong believe.
- Christian radio programs have been remarkable in their scope and impact. Pray for the provision and preservation of staff and freedom to broadcast so that they might continue with these effective programs.
- Government leaders and officials.