

Vatican, Vietnam relations continue to warm

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Cardinal Man

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam

As Vatican and Vietnamese officials continue discussing the possibility of restoring diplomatic relations, Pope Benedict XVI named new bishops for three Vietnamese dioceses and an auxiliary bishop for a fourth diocese. The appointments were announced at the Vatican July 25.

While the Vatican always has insisted the pope has a right to name bishops for every Latin-rite diocese in the world, for the past 15 years Vatican officials have made an annual trip to Vietnam to discuss possible appointments with the country's communist government.

As contacts increased and the visits became routine, both sides began talking about restoring diplomatic relations and established a formal committee to discuss the issue after Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung met Pope Benedict in January 2007.

In an interview July 20 with the Asian Catholic news agency UCA News, Cardinal Jean Baptiste Pham Minh Man of Ho Chi Minh City said a Vietnamese delegation would visit the Vatican in November to discuss the issue further. He added that the task of establishing diplomatic ties between the Vatican and Vietnam now lies with the Vietnamese government.

"The Holy See has been ready to establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam for a long time," said Man. "The key question is now the Vietnamese government."

Man spoke with UCA News upon his return to Ho Chi Minh City after he and 28 other Vietnamese bishops paid their *ad limina* or five-yearly visits, to the Vatican.

The 75-year-old cardinal said he learned about the present situation in the ongoing talks between the two sides during this recent visit, as well as from local sources.

He said that a Vietnamese government delegation, headed by Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet, is

scheduled to travel to Italy in December and could very well meet Pope Benedict then.

The prelate noted that the climate for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two sides has been rather positive over the past few years.

Two years ago, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung paid a landmark visit to Pope Benedict XVI and Vatican officials. Dung, 59, was the first Vietnamese leader to meet a pope since the communists reunited the country in 1975.

In June 2008 in Hanoi, during a working visit by a Vatican delegation, both sides decided to set up their own groups of experts to discuss the issue of diplomatic relations.

Last February, a three-member Vatican delegation, led by Monsignor Pietro Parolin, the Vatican undersecretary for relations with states, paid a working visit to Vietnam. During this meeting, both sides convened the first session of the Vietnam-Vatican Joint Working Group to foster diplomatic relations.

Man said government officials from the Bureau for Religious Affairs also "reminded" Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet of Hanoi to invite the Pope to visit Vietnam during the bishops' recent trip. Kiet is secretary general of the Vietnam Bishops' Conference.

During their meeting with the pope on June 27, Bishop Pierre Nguyen Van Nhon of Dalat, head of the bishops' conference, invited the pontiff to visit their country.

"The Pope gave no direct answer," Man said, adding that a papal visit would require a formal invitation from the government.

He said local bishops hope the pope will visit on Jan. 6, 2011, when the local church concludes a special Jubilee Year celebration.

The special year will mark the 350th anniversary of the establishment of the first two apostolic vicariates in Vietnam and the 50th anniversary of the church hierarchy in Vietnam.

Man, who heads the special jubilee commission, said his commission will organize a congress in November, 2010 in Ho Chi Minh City as part of the celebrations. This congress will involve 200 clergy, religious and laypeople, some from foreign countries.

The new episcopal appointments include: Ho Chi Minh City Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Vu Duy Thong, 57, named as the new bishop of Phan Thiet; 63-year-old Auxiliary Bishop Pierre Nguyen Van De of Bui Chu, named as bishop of Thai Binh; Father Joseph Nguyen Nang, the 55-year-old rector of the seminary in Xuan Loc, named as bishop of Phat Diem, and Father Thomas Vu Dinh Hieu, the 54-year-old chancellor of the Xuan Loc diocese, named as an auxiliary bishop for his diocese.

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