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## **Bush calls for religious freedom in Hanoi**

By Caroline Daniel and Amy Kazmin in Hanoi

At Hanoi's Cua Bac Cathedral, amid a sea of giggling young choristers in white silk robes and red cravats, president George W Bush on Sunday made a solemn call for religious freedom – a plea intended both for Vietnam's communist leadership and his own conservative Christian base.

"A whole society is a society which welcomes basic freedoms, and there's no more basic freedom than the basic freedom to worship as you see fit," Mr Bush said, after attending half an hour of a ground-breaking ecumenical service with both Protestant and Catholic elements - the first ever held at the Catholic Cathedral.

Mr Bush made no explicit reference to Vietnam, merely urging nations to "feel comfortable with, and confident in saying to their people, 'if you feel like praising God you're allowed to do so in any way you see fit.'" Yet the message was clear.

Although the administration last week removed Vietnam from the list of countries that severely restrict religious freedom, many human rights and Christian groups remain concerned about religious repression. That concern emerged during a debate over proposals to normalise trade ties with Vietnam, which failed to pass in the US House of Representatives last week.

Hanoi still remains wary of the potential political power of organised religion, and tightly controls the local hierarchies of its officially recognised religious institutions. Mr Bush - whose personal faith is a signature of his presidency - has been under pressure to push Hanoi to further relax its grip over its population's spiritual life.

Churches like Cua Bac - which was built in 1927 by the French and now sits opposite a large Defence Ministry facility – and Buddhist temples have seen a surge of attendance in recent years, as the Vietnamese have embraced religious practice after decades when many feared that open displays of faith would invoke the wrath of their communist rulers.

Yet Hanoi still insists on the right to vet and approve all new priests, and it has no formal relations with the Vatican, despite having south east Asia's second-largest Catholic population.

Hanoi has less tolerance for some other religious groups - particularly sects of evangelical Protestantism and some independent Buddhist groups - which authorities believe are intertwined with political organisations, some with ties overseas.

It has clamped down on unrecognised Protestant 'house churches' in the coffee-growing Central Highlands, a mountainous region populated by ethnic minorities who have been

aggrieved by an influx of ethnic Vietnamese settlers converting mountain land for coffee plantations.

While Protestantism was initially introduced into the region by US forces in the 1960s, a sect of evangelical Protestantism with an intense focus on a 'promised land' gained many adherents from the mid-1990s, with conversions fuelled partly by evangelical radio broadcasts beamed from the Philippines.

After tensions over land erupted into violent riots in the area in 2001, the authorities began a harsh crackdown on the house churches, which Hanoi believed had fomented the unrest, backed by US-based organisations of Vietnamese dissidents. While many pastors were arrested, the crackdown took a bizarre turn, with local authorities forcing adherents to recant their faith in coercive ceremonies in which they sealed their vow with rituals like drinking goats' blood.

Hanoi says it has since stopped all forced recantations and in response to US pressure, it has adopted laws guaranteeing religious worship. Michael Green, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said Vietnam had taken other steps to loosen up, such as opening new churches and releasing prisoners of conscience, spurred by worries that the issue could strain growing political and economic ties with the US.

"They were worried about China's growing strategic shadow in the region and... they wanted permanent normal trade relations with the US," he said.

But Human Rights Watch said Vietnam's Central Bureau of Religious Affairs still sees some Protestant churches as a cover for separatist political activity. This year, the bureau formally instructed local cadres in the mountainous regions to limit and control the spread of Christianity among ethnic minorities, by targeting newly converted Protestants.

"The Vietnamese government continues to treat some religions with intense suspicion, as 'hostile forces' that abuse religion to create political strife," the rights group said.

The service that Mr Bush attended on Sunday morning, led by the archbishop of Hanoi, was dominated by the robust singing of hymns, but did not include a sermon – perhaps a sign of the political hazards of religious lessons for visiting Presidents.

Still, Mr Bush said he welcomed his "moment to converse with God in a church here in Hanoi." Not all Vietnamese can claim the same right