

Vietnam orders monks to stop profiting from karma rituals

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — Vietnamese authorities have ordered monks at a popular Buddhist pagoda to stop “soul summoning” and “bad karma eviction” ceremonies after an investigation found the rituals were a scam.

Tens of thousands of worshippers have been paying the 18th-century Ba Vang pagoda in northern Quang Ninh province between 1 million and several hundred million dong (\$45 - \$13,500) to have their bad karma vanquished, according to the state-run *Lao Dong (Labor)* newspaper.

The Committee for Religious Affairs, a government body, issued a statement on its website saying “the ritual goes against Buddhist philosophy and violates Vietnam’s law on religion and folk beliefs.”

“It has a negative impact on social order and security,” it added.

Calls to the pagoda were not answered.

Monks at the pagoda teach that all illnesses and misfortune result from bad deeds in previous lives.

Three times a month, they hold a two-day ceremony to “summon wandering souls” and “remove bad karma,” demanding donations, supposedly representing good deeds, to help cure bad karma and make up for supposed bad deeds in previous lives.

Such rituals have been going on for years, but the practice has drawn unfavorable attention as the amounts demanded by the monks soared to the point where they began taking payments by bank transfers and by installments.

Public outrage flared when an inspirational speaker associated with the pagoda blamed a victim for being gang raped, saying she had committed evil acts in a past life in comments posted on the pagoda’s website and on social media. The 20-year-old college student was taken hostage and raped by five men for two



STEEP CEREMONIES. In this undated photo, visitors fill the courtyard of the Ba Vang pagoda in the Uong Bi district of Quang Ninh province, Vietnam. Vietnamese authorities have ordered monks at the popular Buddhist pagoda to stop “soul summoning” and “bad karma eviction” ceremonies, saying such rituals violate the country’s law on religion and folk beliefs. (Vietnam News Agency via AP)

days before she was killed on the eve of the February 5 Lunar New Year.

“The teaching was hurtful and disrespectful to the soul of my daughter,” *Tuoi Tre*, another official newspaper, quoted the woman’s mother as saying.

The monks also teach that homosexuality comes from bad karma and should be “cured” by having people of the opposite sex spend time together.

“Vindictive wandering souls follow people. They bring you illness, marriage problems, and make your children unwell. We have the power to summon the souls and evict them,” the abbot of the pagoda, Thich Truc Thai Minh, told followers during a gathering that was live streamed on social media.

A reporter for *Lao Dong* shot a video at the pagoda showing a monk telling another woman,

who was distraught over losing her only child: “It’s your karma. In previous life, you were a witch.”

“And the wandering soul says it will take your life, too. Not just your child,” the monk said.

Ba Vang pagoda was built on a mountain slope in the Uong Bi district of Quang Ninh province. It was recently renovated and expanded to become one of Vietnam’s largest pagoda complexes.

Only a minority of Vietnam’s 95 million people follow Buddhism, but many non-Buddhists go to pagodas and temples and practice a form of folk religion that includes some Buddhist practices.

Religions that are not registered with the government are prohibited. The Ba Vang pagoda belongs to a registered Vietnamese Buddhist association.

Taiwan's Tsai confirms request to buy new U.S. fighters, tanks

By Christopher Bodeen
The Associated Press

BEIJING — Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said her government has asked to purchase advanced new fighter jets and tanks from the U.S., a request that if approved, could set off new tensions between the U.S. and China.

Beijing considers self-governing Taiwan part of China, to be annexed by force if necessary. Speaking during a visit to Hawai’i, Tsai said requests have been submitted for F-16V fighters and M1 Abrams tanks.

The new weaponry would “greatly enhance our land and air capabilities, strengthen military morale, and show to the world the U.S. commitment to Taiwan’s defense,” Tsai said.

The U.S. is Taiwan’s main supplier of defensive weapons, despite the lack of formal diplomatic ties. The F-16V is the most advanced version of the plane that already forms the backbone of Taiwan’s air forces, while the M1 Abrams would mark a significant upgrade from the aging, refurbished models the army now uses.

Reports say Taiwan is seeking 66 of the planes.

In Beijing, defense ministry spokesman Wu Qian reiterated that China was “firmly opposed” to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and military exchanges between the sides.

Garuda Indonesia seeks to cancel order for 49 Boeing Max 8s

By Niniek Karmini
The Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia — In a blow for Boeing, Indonesia’s flag carrier is seeking the cancellation of a multibillion dollar order for 49 of the manufacturer’s 737 Max 8 jets, citing a loss of confidence after two crashes in the past six months.

It was the first announcement of a cancellation since Boeing’s new model aircraft were grounded following fatal crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia.

PT Garuda Indonesia, which had ordered 50 Max 8 jets in 2014 and received just one plane last year, has sent a letter to Boeing requesting to cancel the order worth \$4.9 billion, the company’s spokesman, Ikhsan Rosan, said. The carrier has so far paid Boeing about \$26 million for the order.

Garuda joined other airlines worldwide in grounding its one Max 8 jet after the crash of an Ethiopian Airlines flight that killed all 157 people aboard. It came less than five months after 189 people died in

the October 29 crash of another Max 8, operated by Indonesian private carrier Lion Air.

“Passengers always ask what type of plane they will fly as they have lost trust and confidence in the Max 8 jet,” Rosan told The Associated Press, “This would harm our business.”

He said Garuda planned to meet with Boeing representatives in Jakarta to discuss details of cancelling the order.

“We don’t want to use Max jets ... but maybe will consider switching it with another Boeing model of plane,” Rosan said. He said Indonesian passengers are afraid to take flights using any Max model, whether it’s the 8, 9, or 10 series.

A preliminary report from Indonesia’s National Transportation Safety Committee in December stopped short of declaring a probable cause of the October 29 crash.

Officials have provided scant details since then, saying they are still analyzing data from a cockpit voice recorder that was only recovered from the sea in January.

Canada takes in refugee

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and around the world who have made this possible,” he wrote in French. “After so many years, the first of the families who helped me is free and has a future. But the work is not over — with

solidarity and compassion, Canada can save them all.”

Canadian foreign affairs minister Chrystia Freeland said she could not comment on privately sponsored refugee applications.



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