

Vietnam says president to make rare Vatican trip

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The two sides do not have diplomatic relations but in recent years have begun a reconciliation.

Triet's December 11 Vatican stop will be part of a European tour taking in Italy, Spain and Slovakia.

"During his visit to Italy, Nguyen Minh Triet will have a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI," said Nguyen Phuong Nga, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman.

They will discuss "measures to reinforce relations between Vietnam and the Vatican," which she said have recently been progressing well.

Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made a historic visit to the Vatican in 2007, marking a major thaw in relations.

Early this year a senior Vatican official held the first formal meetings with Vietnamese authorities in Hanoi to discuss diplomatic ties.

Nga said she was not able to give details of Triet's Vatican agenda, including whether the issue of confiscated Catholic land will be broached.

The losses started with the end of French colonial rule in 1954. In December 2007, Catholics began a series of demonstrations over seized land that led to occasional clashes with the police.

A Catholic priest, Nguyen Van Ly, was jailed for eight years in 2007 for spreading propaganda against the communist state.

The case drew condemnation from diplomats, Vietnam watchers and human rights groups, and in early July this year a bipartisan group of 37 United States senators sent a letter to Triet calling for Ly's release.

His sister has said he is in deteriorating health.

Vietnam has Southeast Asia's largest Roman Catholic community after the Philippines -- about six million in a population of 86 million

Religious activity remains under state control in Vietnam.

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