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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 28, 2006

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WASHINGTON - U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Chair Michael Cromartie testified on Wednesday, March 29, before the House International Relations (HIRC) Subcommittee on Africa, Human Rights, and International Organizations at hearing titled "The Human Rights Dialogue with Vietnam: Is Vietnam Making Significant Progress?" The hearing was held at 2:00 p.m. in 2172 Rayburn House Office Building.

For the past two years, the State Department has designated Vietnam as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for its severe violations of religious freedom. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) requires that the U.S. government take some diplomatic or economic action against countries designated as CPCs. On May 5, 2005, the United States signed an agreement with Vietnam in which Vietnam agreed to take certain steps to improve religious freedom conditions before the U.S. would "consider" lifting the CPC designation.

Over the past year, as a result of persistent diplomacy and intense international attention, there have been some positive developments in both law and practice in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government released some religious prisoners, officially outlawed forced recantations of faith, issued new guidelines to help speed the process of registration, and registered at least 29 religious venues in the Central Highlands and allowed hundreds more to operate prior to registration. In addition, restrictions eased on Catholics and some Buddhist practice.

However, based on information gathered by the Commission from sources within Vietnam, the May 5, 2005 agreement has not been fully implemented. "Vietnam has not sufficiently addressed the issues that originally lead to their CPC designation," said USCIRF chair Michel Cromartie. Religious prisoners remain behind bars and new arrests have been made, hundreds of churches remain closed, forced renunciations of faith continue, and restrictions on and harassment of all of Vietnam's diverse religious communities remain. Targeted specifically are Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, unregistered "house churches," Vietnamese Mennonites, followers of Hoa Hao Buddhism, and the banned United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV).

"Vietnam continues to restrict freedoms of speech, assembly, association and religion and arrests and abuses in these areas still occur. Although, Vietnam is in some respects a less repressive society now than ten or fifteen years ago, we should not conclude that Vietnam's economic openness has led directly to political openness or greater respect for human rights," said Cromartie. "As Vietnam continues to expand the boundaries of economic freedom, including taking steps toward WTO membership, the United States should continue to encourage Vietnam to uphold its international

commitments on human rights and religious freedom. This includes full implementation of the May 5, 2005 agreement. And until significant and tangible progress is made on the ground, Vietnam's CPC designation should be maintained."

The full text of USCIRF Chair Cromartie's testimony will be available after 2:00 p.m. on May 29 on the Commission's web site at www.uscirf.gov.

Michael Cromartie, Chair

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