

February 16, 2005: Vietnam: USCIRF Welcomes Prime Minister's "Instructions on Protestantism"

Calls for Additional Action to End Rights Violations for all Religious Groups

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Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Khai's new instructions on Protestant religious organizations, but remains concerned that the Prime Minister's instructions only affect one segment of the Vietnamese population. Vietnam is in the midst of consultations with the U.S. over its designation as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for egregious abuses of religious freedom. The consultation period ends on March 15, 2005. If Vietnam does not respond to U.S. government concerns, the CPC designation carries statutory penalties.

The Prime Minister's new instructions would allow Protestant "house churches" in the Central Highlands and northwest provinces to operate if they renounce connections to groups that Hanoi has accused of organizing anti-government protests. The instructions also "outlaw" forced renunciation of faith efforts by government officials. The government's pronouncement came a week after prominent democracy, free speech, and religious freedom advocates, Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, Nguyen Dan Que, Nguyen Dinh Huy, and Thich Thien Minh were released from prison in a Tet New Year amnesty.

"These are positive steps," said Commission Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "The new instructions are an attempt by the government of Vietnam to address some of the concerns that, for the first time last fall, placed Vietnam on the State Department's CPC list. But the instructions remain qualified and vague and open to interpretation by local government officials and public security forces. Many of last year's most serious religious freedom abuses could still have occurred under these guidelines. We need to wait and see what concrete actions accompany the new instructions."

In addition to the opening of churches and meeting points in the Central Highlands and northwest provinces closed since 2001, the Commission has recommended additional actions such as ending harassment and detention of United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) leaders and other religious figures and establishing a legal framework for the UBCV, the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and others to register with the government and operate independently with leaders of their own choosing. Other recommendations can be found in the Commission's annual report.

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