

## September 12, 2001: Congress Should Demand Religious-Freedom Improvements As It Considers Vietnam Trade

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The Senate will soon consider the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) with Vietnam, approved by the House of Representatives last week. The agreement will extend Normal Trade Relations status to Vietnam, although this will remain subject to annual review. Given the very serious violations of religious freedom in that country, the Commission in May made a series of recommendations to the Bush Administration and Congress. Primary among these was that U.S. lawmakers should ratify the BTA only after Hanoi undertakes to improve protection of religious freedom or after Congress passes a resolution calling for the Vietnamese government to make such improvements. The Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R. 2833) passed by the House last week implements this and other Commission recommendations. Besides expressing U.S. concern about Vietnam's religious-freedom and human rights abuses, the Act authorizes assistance to organizations promoting human rights in Vietnam and declares support for Radio Free Asia broadcasting. The Commission urges the Senate to act likewise. The Commission believes that approval of the BTA without any U.S. action with regard to religious freedom risks worsening the religious-freedom situation in Vietnam because it may be interpreted by the government of Vietnam as a signal of American indifference. The Commission notes that religious freedom in the People's Republic of China declined markedly after last year's approval of Permanent Normal Trade Relations status, unaccompanied by any substantial U.S. action with regard to religious freedom in that country. Despite a marked increase in religious practice among the Vietnamese people in the last 10 years, the Vietnamese government continues to suppress organized religious activities forcefully and to monitor and control religious communities. This repression is mirrored by the recent crackdown on important political dissidents. The government prohibits religious activity by those not affiliated with one of the six officially recognized religious organizations. Individuals have been detained, fined, imprisoned, and kept under close surveillance by security forces for engaging in "illegal" religious activities. In addition, the government uses the recognition process to monitor and control officially sanctioned religious groups: restricting the procurement and distribution of religious literature, controlling religious training, and interfering with the selection of religious leaders. The Vietnamese government in March placed Fr. Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly under administrative detention (i.e. house arrest) for "publicly slandering" the Vietnamese Communist Party and "distorting" the government's policy on religion. This occurred after Fr. Ly submitted written testimony on religious persecution in Vietnam for the Commission's February 2001 hearing on that country. In order to demonstrate significant improvement in religious freedom, the Vietnamese government should: Release from imprisonment, detention, house arrest, or intimidating surveillance persons who are so restricted due to their religious identities or activities. Permit unhindered access to religious leaders by U.S. diplomatic personnel and government officials, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and respected international human rights organizations, including, if requested, a return visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance. Establish the freedom to engage in religious activities (including the freedom for religious groups to govern themselves and select their leaders, worship publicly, express and advocate religious beliefs, and distribute religious literature) outside state-controlled religious organizations and eliminate controls on the activities of officially registered organizations. Allow indigenous religious communities to conduct educational, charitable, and humanitarian activities. Permit religious groups to gather for annual observances of primary religious holidays. Return confiscated religious properties. Permit domestic Vietnamese religious organizations and individuals to interact with foreign organizations and individuals.

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