

## June 19, 2008: Commissioner Leo Speaks at Congressional Press Conference on Vietnam

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 19, 2008

Contact: Judith Ingram,

Communications Director,

(202) 523-3240, ext. 127

WASHINGTON- Commission Leonard Leo of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom joined Representatives Chris Smith (R-NJ), Frank Wolf (R-VA), Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Ed Royce (R-CA), Dan Lungren (R-CA), and Loretta Sanchez (D-CA) in a press conference sponsored by the bipartisan House Vietnam Caucus regarding the demonstrated complicity of Vietnam in various human rights violations, particularly against its minority communities.

In advance of the expected visit of Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to the United States, the bipartisan House Vietnam Caucus, along with several Vietnamese community leaders, held press conference highlighting the horrific human rights abuses and the urgent "need to reform" in Vietnam. The Members called upon President Bush to make human rights a focal point of his agenda in his upcoming meetings with the Vietnamese Prime Minister.

Commissioner Leonard A. Leo addressed concerns regarding the freedom of religion in Vietnam that prompted the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to recommend that Vietnam be re-designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, in its 2008 Annual Report. "This press conference is well-timed, just a few days ahead of the visit of the Vietnamese Prime Minister to Washington, and sends an important signal to the Vietnamese government that human rights abuses in Vietnam are of deep concern to both the U.S. government and the citizens of the United States," said Commissioner Leo.

"In view of the ongoing and serious problems faced by many of Vietnam's religious communities, the uneven pace of reforms meant to improve the situation, the continued detention of religious prisoners of concern, and what can only be seen as a deteriorating human rights situation overall, the Commission again last month in the release of our Annual Report recommended that Vietnam be re-designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998," said Commissioner Leo.

The press conference took place on the Terrace of the Cannon House Office Building on Thursday, June 19th at 10:30 a.m.

The complete text of Commissioner Leo's remarks is available below.

Commissioner Leonard Leo Addresses Religious Freedom Abuses in Vietnam

Congressional Vietnam Caucus Press Conference

June 19, 2008

I want to thank the Vietnam Human Rights Caucus for organizing this press conference and inviting the Commission on International Religious Freedom to address it. It is well-timed, just a few days ahead of the visit of the Vietnamese Prime Minister to Washington, and sends an important signal to the Vietnamese government that human rights abuses in Vietnam are of deep concern to both the U.S. government and the citizens of the United States.

A Commission delegation spent two weeks in Vietnam last October. We met government officials, religious leaders, civil society representatives, and several prisoners including Buddhist monk Thich Quang Do, Catholic priest Phan Van Loi, Nguyen Van Dai, and

LeThi Cong Nhan.

Although religious freedom conditions have improved since the State Department first designated Vietnam a "Country of Particular Concern" or CPC in 2004, the progress has occurred alongside persistent abuses, discrimination, and restrictions. The government continues to imprison and detain dozens of individuals motivated by their religion or conscience to advocate for religious freedom reforms in Vietnam.

After returning from Vietnam, the Commission concluded that religious freedom conditions remain problematic: improvements for some religious communities do not extend fully to others; progress in one province is not realized in another; national laws are not fully implemented at the local and provincial levels and are sometimes used to restrict rather than protect religious freedom; and there continue to be far too many abuses and restrictions affecting Vietnam's diverse religious communities, including the imprisonment and detention of individuals for reasons related to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy.

The government continues to imprison and detain dozens of individuals motivated by their religion or conscience to advocate for religious freedom reforms in Vietnam.

There continue to be isolated but credible reports of forced renunciations of faith, including the beating death of an ethnic minority Protestant in 2007.

Independent religious activity is illegal. Those who seek to practice outside of government-approved religious organizations-such as the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the Hoa Hao Cao Dai and some Protestants, face harassment, detention, and arrest.

Growing religious practice among ethnic minority Buddhists and Protestants is often viewed as a security threat, requiring officials, in the words of a government-issued training manual, to manage, control and "resolutely overcome" religious growth among ethnic minorities.

Religious freedom abuses and restrictions are not simply a concern of the past. We have continued to receive reports of

serious abuses, including:

- the disappearance of a Khmer Buddhist monk who refused to defrock novice monks participating in February 2007 demonstrations against religious freedom restrictions;
- the detention of some monks and vandalism of pagodas associated with the UBCV; and
- local government officials confiscating the property and destroying the homes of ethnic minority Protestants in the northwest provinces, reportedly in an effort to persuade them to renounce their faith and return to traditional religious practices.

In view of the ongoing and serious problems faced by many of Vietnam's religious communities, the uneven pace of reforms meant to improve the situation, the continued detention of religious prisoners of concern, and what can only be seen as a deteriorating human rights situation overall, the Commission again last month in the release of our Annual Report recommended that Vietnam be re-designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

Vietnam was removed from the State Department's CPC list in November 2006, on the eve of President Bush's visit to Hanoi for the Asian Pacific Economic Conference. At that time, the Commission expressed its concern over the decision to lift the CPC designation.

The Commission's view differs from that of the State Department: we continue to find that lifting Vietnam's CPC designation in 2006 was premature, removing an effective diplomatic tool. The absence of that tool was all the more evident when Vietnam launched a crackdown on human rights, democracy, free speech, labor, and religious freedom advocates shortly after the State Department made the decision to lift the CPC designation.

One of the factors the Commission used in making our CPC recommendation is that there continue to be religious "prisoners of concern" in Vietnam.

March 2008 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary Christopher Hill stated that Vietnam "no longer qualifies as a severe violator of religious freedom" because "all individuals the United States had identified as prisoners of concern for reasons connected to their faith" have been released.

Yet

it is the Commission's contention that there are scores of religious prisoners of concern in Vietnam, detained and imprisoned, in part, for their attempt to exercise their religious freedom or to advocate on behalf of it.

In

addition there are hundreds of Montagnard Protestants who were imprisoned after 2001 and 2004 demonstrations for land rights and religious freedom. Religious leaders were arrested because they refused to inform on congregants who participated in the demonstrations, because they were suspected of making contacts with groups abroad, or for sheltering individuals seeking asylum in Cambodia

Though the

U.S.-Vietnamese relationship continues to grow, it is too soon to determine whether the Vietnamese government is fully committed to respecting religious freedom instead of maintaining control of its diverse religious communities.