
Sept. 24, 2008: Vietnam: U.S. Government Should Re-Designate Vietnam Among Worst Violators of Religious Freedom, Press for Unconditional Release of Prisoners

For Immediate Release

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WASHINGTON—Vietnam continues to demonstrate a disturbing disregard for fundamental human rights, with police violence against protesters at peaceful vigils at properties formerly owned by the Catholic Church of Vietnam, the drawn-out imprisonment and house arrest of numerous religious freedom advocates, and the detentions earlier this month of pro-democracy activists. Rather than releasing imprisoned human rights lawyer and religious freedom advocate Li Thi Cong Nhan, the Vietnamese government has offered her exile abroad, which she refused. The U.S. Commission calls on the State Department to re-designate Vietnam among the worst violators of religious freedom and demand the unconditional release of all prisoners of concern.

“Too often in Vietnam, individuals who peacefully organize and express views about religious freedom and human rights—and the freedoms required to protect them—are detained, arrested, or intimidated,” said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. “As a member of the U.N. Security Council, Vietnam should be upholding human rights fully and should not view peaceful actions to advance religious freedom as a security threat.”

Catholics in Hanoi have been holding prayer vigils at Catholic Church properties continuously since December to urge their return to the Church. The Church properties were seized by the Communist government in the mid-1950s. Though brief clashes with police have interrupted other peaceful vigils at former Catholic properties, over the past three weeks reports indicate that police have detained as many as eight protesters at the grounds of a former monastery of the Redemptorist order. In addition to the arrests, security personnel used batons to disperse a silent vigil seeking the release of those arrested. Eyewitness reports indicate that at least 12 other individuals were briefly detained following the vigil at the police station and one priest sustained serious injuries. The Commission has received further disturbing

reports that the Vietnamese government has accused Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet of inciting the protests and threatened "extreme actions" to end the peaceful vigils. Large crowds are gathering at the sight despite warnings.

Li Thi Cong Nhan is among the prisoners of concern that the Commission on International Religious Freedom met during its visit to Vietnam late last year. Scores of such prisoners have been put behind bars in Vietnam for reasons related to their exercise or advocacy of freedom of religion or belief, including, for example, calling for legal reforms to advance religious freedom or organizing protests against religious freedom restrictions. Li Thi Cong Nhan was arrested along with Fr. Nguyen Van Ly and Nguyen Van Dai in March 2007 as part of the larger crackdown on democracy, labor, free speech, religious freedom, and human rights advocates by the Vietnamese government.

"It is outrageous that Li Thi Cong Nhan was ever arrested in the first place, and that she hasn't been released," Gaer said. "She and all prisoners of concern in Vietnam should be released immediately, without conditions, and without the frequent follow-on sentence of house arrest that Vietnamese authorities use to restrict the freedom of rights advocates."

The Commission recently issued its Policy Focus Vietnam, assessing religious freedom conditions in Vietnam. After traveling to Vietnam, the Commission concluded that while progress has been made in some areas, improvements did not extend to all religious communities, provinces, or ethnic minorities. In addition, laws issued at the national level were not fully implemented or were ignored at the local level and there continue to be too many abuses of and restrictions on religious freedom experienced by diverse religious communities, including against those who peacefully advocate religious freedom.

Such serious violations demonstrate that the government of Vietnam is failing the test of compliance with its religious freedom obligations under international instruments. As a result, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully differs with the U.S. State Department's decision to remove Vietnam from its list of "Countries of Particular Concern" in 2006, and its continued assessment that Vietnam falls "below the threshold" of being added to this list of the world's worst violators of religious freedom.

Nonetheless, the Commission commends the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom for its sustained efforts to end violations of religious freedom in Vietnam. It further urges the U.S. Government to demand that the Vietnamese government:

- immediately and unconditionally release Li Thi Cong Nhan and other rights advocates from prison and house arrest;
- allow the Catholic Church and other religious organizations to function freely; and
- permit the freedom of expression including the right to peaceful protest.

The Commission calls for Vietnam to be re-designated as one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom for its continuing systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom and other human rights.