

September 10, 2003: Vietnam: Fr. Thaddeus Van Ly's Relatives Sentenced for "Abusing Democratic Freedoms"

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, wrote to Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly to convey its strongest concerns about the sentences handed down today against Nguyen Thi Hoa and her brothers, Nguyen Vu Viet and Nguyen Truc Cuong, for "abusing democratic freedoms," and to call for their immediate release. The three, whose sentences range from three to five years, are the niece and nephews of imprisoned Catholic priest and religious prisoner, Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly.

Fr. Ly was sentenced to 15 years in prison in October 2001 after he submitted written testimony to the USCIRF at its hearing on religious freedom conditions in Vietnam. Fr. Ly's niece and nephews were detained in June of 2002 for forwarding information about their uncle's imprisonment to human rights organizations outside Vietnam.

"The convictions illustrate once again," said USCIRF Chair Michael Young, "Vietnam's disregard of international human rights standards. The imprisonment of Fr. Ly, his relatives, and the many other political and religious prisoners in Vietnam is a major impediment to expanded relations between our two countries. The U.S. government must make this clear and demand that these four persons, Fr. Ly and his relatives, be released at once."

The Commission recommended that Vietnam be designated as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for its ongoing and egregious abuses of religious freedom. In designating a country as a CPC, the Secretary of State must take one or more actions specified by IRFA including everything from a private demarche to ongoing and multiple sanctions. The Secretary of State has yet to designate Vietnam as a CPC.

"These individuals were exercising their internationally protected right of free speech and freedom of religion. They should be immediately and unconditionally released. This blatant disregard of the most basic human rights makes clear why Vietnam should be immediately designated a CPC," said Young.

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

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