

## November 6, 2006: VIETNAM: USCIRF Letter to Secretary of State Rice Urges Maintaining "Country of Particular Concern" Status

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

Angela Stephens, Assistant Communications Director,

(202) 523-3240, ext. 114 WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal agency, has sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urging her to maintain Vietnam as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The Commission also recommended that Secretary Rice raise religious freedom concerns during her upcoming visit to Vietnam. "According to evidence available to the Commission from sources in Vietnam, severe restrictions on religious freedom and abuses continue in Vietnam in all of the areas cited by the State Department when Vietnam was designated a CPC in 2004," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. While the Vietnamese government has taken some positive steps over the past year to address religious freedom concerns, Gaer said, "Religious prisoners remain confined, only a tiny fraction of the churches closed since 2001 have been re-opened, and forced renunciations of faith continue, as do restrictions on and harassment of all of Vietnam's diverse religious communities." For example, although the Vietnamese have released prominent prisoners of concern, in the last year a dozen new arrests have been made and prominent leaders remain under house arrest. Even those recently released remain under intense government surveillance. The Commission has also concluded that the Vietnamese government has not fully complied with the May 2005 agreement reached with the United States to improve religious freedom in Vietnam. "The facts alone warrant redesignation. Moreover, in the Commission's view, lifting the CPC designation will remove an important and positive incentive that has stimulated U.S.-Vietnamese discussions on religious freedom," Gaer added. "Over the last year and a half, religious freedom concerns have been made a top diplomatic priority with productive results. The Vietnamese are beginning to recognize that human rights concerns will not be subsumed to economic or security interests." The Commission also sent with the letter to Secretary Rice an attachment with recommendations for new U.S. assistance programs to support human rights and legal reforms in Vietnam. The text of the letter to Secretary Rice follows: Dear Secretary Rice, The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urges you to maintain Vietnam as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 and to raise religious freedom concerns during your upcoming visit to Vietnam during the APEC meetings. We are sending you our findings on Vietnam pursuant to Section 402(b)(1)(B) of IRFA. Evidence available to the Commission from sources inside Vietnam indicate that restrictions and abuses continue in all the areas cited by the State Department when Vietnam was designated a CPC in 2004. Religious prisoners remain confined, only a tiny fraction of the churches closed since 2001 have been re-opened, forced renunciations of faith continue, as do restrictions on and harassment of all of Vietnam's diverse religious communities. All these abuses occur less frequently than in the past; however, there remain severe concerns in all these areas. Although the Vietnamese government has taken some positive steps over the past year to address religious freedom concerns, the Commission has concluded that Vietnam has not yet fully complied with the May 2005 agreement reached with the United States to address religious freedom concerns. In that agreement, Vietnam promised to implement fully its new laws on religion and release prisoners of concern, while the United States promised to "consider" removing the CPC designation. The Vietnamese have released prominent prisoners of concern, however, in the last year a dozen new arrests have been made and prominent leaders remain under house arrest. Even those recently released remain under intense government surveillance. The May 2005 agreement also stipulated that Vietnam needed to fully implement its new laws on religion. Over the past two years, the Vietnamese government issued orders banning forced renunciations of faith and two ordinances intended to loosen restrictions on religious practice and registration. It is the Commission's view, however, that Vietnam's new laws on religion are being used to restrict and control freedom rather than protect it. For example, forced renunciations of faith continue particularly among ethnic minority Protestants and Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) monks and nuns. Additionally, it has come to our attention that security forces are using the new laws to detain religious leaders and deny legal status to the UBCV and some Hoa Hao Buddhists, Vietnamese Mennonites, and Hmong and Montagnard Protestants, particularly those who refuse to join the government-approved religious organizations. Therefore, in our view, it is much too soon for the United States to conclude that Vietnam's new laws will be applied without discrimination or used to protect and advance religious freedom. These facts alone warrant Vietnam's re-designation as a CPC. Moreover, in the Commission's view, lifting the CPC designation by you under IRFA will, in fact, remove an important and positive incentive that has stimulated U.S.-Vietnamese discussions on religious freedom. Over the last year and half, religious freedom concerns have been made a diplomatic priority with productive results. We applaud the efforts of the Department, including those of Ambassador John Hanford and Ambassador Michael Marine. The Vietnamese government recognizes that religious freedom is an important U.S. interest that cannot be avoided in bilateral relations. Despite fears to the contrary, the CPC designation has not hindered progress on economic and security interests that the United States shares with Vietnam. Retaining the CPC designation would indicate that U.S. human rights concerns remain a priority and are critical to the scope and progress of U.S.-Vietnamese relations. In addition, it would continue to provide incentives for the Vietnamese government to address remaining U.S. concerns, to establish permanent legal protections for religious and ethnic minorities, and to promote cooperation with U.S. assistance programs that advance projects of legal reform, economic development for ethnic minorities, and capacity building for an emerging civil society. In the past, the Commission has

made many recommendations for U.S. assistance programs toward human rights, targeted economic development, and rule of law projects. We believe strategic re-prioritizing of U.S. aid toward these areas is in the interests of both countries. We have attached specific recommendations for your review. Continued progress on religious freedom and related human rights is in the interests of both the U.S. and Vietnam. While Vietnam continues to warrant CPC designation this year, we hope that continued and intense diplomatic engagement will continue and additional positive steps can be taken that can only strengthen future relations. We urge you to maintain the CPC designation again this year and prominently discuss religious freedom concerns during your trip in November. Sincerely,

Felice D. Gaer

ChairAttachment:cc: Barry F. Lowenkron, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

John V. Hanford III, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

Michael Kozak, Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights, and International Operations

Christopher R. Hill, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Recommendation for U.S. Foreign Assistance Programs for Vietnam

Supporting

Human Rights and Legal Reform Montagnard Development Program (MDP): Full and vigorous implementation of the MDP which was created last year as part of the House and Senate Foreign Operations conference report. The MDP would provide targeted humanitarian and development support to the Montagnard/ Hmong people. It would provide needed development funds for ethnic minorities whose demands for land rights and religious freedom are closely connected. This program is consistent with Vietnam's own stated goals of reducing poverty in the Central Highlands and northwest provinces and with the need for reform, transparency, and access to regions where many religious freedom abuses continue to occur.

New U.S. Assistance for Civil Society and Legal Reform: Re-allocation of the funds that formerly supported the STAR (Support for Trade Acceleration Program) to new projects human rights training, civil society capacity building, and non-commercial rule of law programs in Vietnam. The Commission suggests the funds go to the creation of the Promoting Equal Rights and the Rule of Law (PEARL) program. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has said he is committed to reform, democracy and rule of law. The U.S. government should take him at his word and assist in that process.

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

- Michael Cromartie, Vice Chair Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Vice Chair Nina Shea, Vice Chair Preeta D. Bansal Archbishop Charles J. Chaput Khaled Abou El Fadl Richard D. Land Bishop Ricardo Ramirez Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director