

February 3, 2005: Vietnam: USCIRF welcomes release of RF advocates, but notes overall lack of human rights

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has confirmed that Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly has returned to his family home today in the central province of Thue Thien-Hue. Fr. Ly was released with several other prominent democracy, free speech, and religious freedom advocates, including Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, Nguyen Dinh Huy, and Thich Thien Minh. Fr. Ly was released from prison as part of a general amnesty coinciding with the Tet New Year holiday. Both Fr. Ly and Dr. Que are well-known advocates of religious freedom and democracy and have openly criticized the Vietnamese government for its poor human rights record. Fr. Ly angered Vietnamese authorities when he submitted written testimony to a USCIRF hearing in 2001. In the testimony he criticized the Vietnamese government's interference with religious belief and practice and urged the United States not to ratify the bilateral trade agreement (BTA) until the communist government improved its human rights record. He was charged with undermining national unity and sentenced in 2001 to 15 years in jail plus five years of house arrest. Dr. Huy was arrested in 1993 for planning an international conference on human rights. United Buddhist Church of Vietnam monk Thich Thien Minh has been imprisoned since 1979 for protesting the government takeover of his pagoda. "In light of the asserted basis for his arrest, Fr. Ly's freedom is particularly important to the Commission. For the past three years we have worked hard to focus international and domestic pressure for his release," said USCIRF Chair Preeti D. Bansal. "We also welcome the release of Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, Nguyen Dinh Huy, and Thich Thien Minh, but recognize that many prisoners remain in Vietnam for doing nothing more than peacefully advocating for the freedom of thought, conscience, and belief." Last year, the U.S. State Department, as urged by the Commission, named Vietnam a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for egregious, ongoing, and systematic abuses of the freedom of religion and belief. The CPC designation carries with it the possibility of sanctions if the government of Vietnam fails to address concerns about religious freedom abuses. Continued Bansal, "Vietnam ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) but many of the fundamental rights of the ICCPR have either not been incorporated into the domestic law or are qualified by vague prohibition against undermining national unity or security. We hope the release of Fr. Ly, Dr. Que, and the others will signal a change in Vietnam's human rights record, but we temper that hope with the sober reality that prisoner releases do not mean structural change. Until there is such change, the government of Vietnam has not sufficiently addressed the concerns that lead to the CPC designation in the first place."

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