

May 9, 2005: Vietnam: Agreement Reached But Results Awaited

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) notes that the agreement announced last week between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments appears to address a number of important religious freedom concerns, but the Commission emphasizes that dramatic actions still need to be taken by Vietnam before CPC designation should be altered. The effect of signing this agreement is the avoidance of more stringent actions available under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), including economic sanctions, required for countries designated as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs. Vietnam was designated a CPC by the State Department in September 2004. "This was the first diplomatic agreement signed with a CPC country since the passage of IRFA. The use of CPC designation as a diplomatic tool has allowed the two countries to talk seriously about religious freedom issues. However, we note that although some details of the agreement were discussed, the agreement itself is not public and the Commission has not seen it," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "Moreover, the agreement only signals promises of improvement and not actual measurable progress, and from what has been announced by the State Department, it appears to leave a number of important areas of religious freedom concern unaddressed. The Commission will continue to consult with the State Department and the Congress on the implementation of Vietnam's commitments undertaken in this agreement and calls for the creation of a monitoring mechanism to ensure that the agreement is fulfilled and other issues are resolved." In the past two months, the government of Vietnam has made several gestures, including the release of prominent dissidents, a directive to stop forcing Protestants to recant their faith, and another to streamline the application process for religious groups registering with the government. These actions were cited by the State Department as evidence of progress. However, important issues appear to remain unresolved or unaddressed in the agreement that had resulted in Vietnam's CPC designation: Leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) continue to be harassed and detained, and there is no legal framework for the UBCV, the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and others to register with the government and operate independently with leaders of their own choosing; Over a hundred individuals remain in prison or under some form of house arrest for religious activity, according to human rights groups, although actual numbers are difficult to obtain because of the lack of judicial transparency; Over a thousand churches, home worship centers, and meeting places remain closed, and forced or coerced renunciations of faith continue in some parts of the country. Targeted in particular are ethnic minority Protestants, Mennonites, Hoa Hao Buddhists, and leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam; Troubling reports continue of new arrests and pressure on religious and ethnic minorities; Evidence emerging from the Central Highlands suggests that the Prime Minister's "Instructions on Protestantism" is being used by security forces to compel ethnic minority Protestants to join the government-approved Protestant organization, give up their distinctive faith tradition, or face criminal penalties; and The government continues to impose limits on the number of candidates allowed to study for Roman Catholic priesthood, controls the appointment and promotion of Catholic clergy, and has seized church properties. Continued Bansal, "Based on the State Department's comments accompanying the release of the agreement, the Commission remains concerned that Vietnam does not appear to have made any commitments or taken positive steps in these important areas of religious freedom concern."

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