

June 22, 2005: Vietnam: USCIRF calls on the State Department to make "secret" May 5 agreement with Vietnam public

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WASHINGTON - President George W. Bush announced yesterday that the United States and Vietnam had reached a "landmark agreement that will make it easier for people to worship freely in Vietnam." The agreement to which the President referred was first announced on May 5, 2005 by the State Department. The agreement, however, has not been made public, and the Commission calls on the State Department to disclose the substance of this important human rights agreement.

That agreement was the first diplomatic accord reached with a "country of particular concern" (CPC) since the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The IRFA legislation stipulates that a country designated as a CPC can avoid sanctions by entering into a "binding agreement" that details specific steps toward progress on religious freedom.

In testimony this week before the House International Relations Committee, USCIRF Vice Chair Nina Shea said that the Commission found it troubling that an agreement whose details are secret could be cited as evidence of progress because there was no way to monitor its provisions and no promise of access to regions, such as the Central Highlands and northwest provinces, that have experienced the most human rights problems. Shea called for the creation of a monitoring mechanism to ensure that the agreement is fulfilled and other issues of concern are addressed. "Until there is independent monitoring, any claims of progress on religious freedom should be viewed with skepticism," said Shea.

Over the past six months, the Vietnamese government has made several gestures to address religious freedom concerns, including the release of several prominent dissidents, a directive to stop forcing Protestants to recant their faith, and another to streamline the application process for religious groups seeking government approval. However, in her testimony, Commissioner Shea noted that the actions taken thus far only signal promises of improvement and not actual measurable progress. She added, "Promises do not mean progress in addressing the tangible reasons that landed Vietnam on the CPC list in the first place. Religious prisoners remain behind bars, churches remain closed, and restrictions and harassment on all of Vietnam's diverse religious communities continues. Moreover, troubling reports continue to arrive of new arrests and harassment of religious and ethnic minorities in Vietnam, despite promises that the new laws would improve religious freedom conditions." Commissioner Shea's HIRC testimony offered specific examples of ongoing forced renunciations of faith that occurred in the last month.

In addition, the Commission also has made specific recommendations for Congressional and Administration action in the areas of public diplomacy, economic development, education, and rule of law programs for Vietnam which would help to advance freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. These may be found in the Commission's 2005 Annual Report.

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