

Commission Asks Pres. Clinton to Raise Religious-Freedom Issues During Trip to Vietnam

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote to President Clinton October 4 urging that he raise with the government of Vietnam "the need to protect rather than infringe upon religious freedom and the security of religious believers there." President Clinton will travel to Vietnam in November. The Commission is concerned that the government of Vietnam prohibits religious activity by those not affiliated with one of the six officially recognized religious organizations. In addition, the United States has been engaged in a process of normalizing trade relations with Vietnam. While the Commission has not yet taken a position on this issue, "the Commission respectfully recommends that you impress upon Prime Minister Phan Van Kai that the promotion of religious freedom is indispensable to the continuation of healthy and increasingly close relations between Vietnam and the United States." The text of the letter follows: October 4, 2000 Dear Mr. President: On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am writing to urge that during your upcoming trip to Vietnam you impress upon that government the need to protect rather than infringe upon religious freedom and the security of religious believers there. In the last year, the Vietnamese government has continued its deliberate assault on the religious freedom of its own people. The government prohibits religious activity by those not affiliated with one of the six officially recognized religious organizations. In addition, the government uses the recognition process to monitor and interfere with the religious activities of official religious groups: restricting the procurement and distribution of religious literature, religious training, and ordination, and trying to influence the selection of religious leaders. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) continues to be banned by the state. Its Supreme Patriarch, Thich Huyen Quang, has been in detention since the early 1980's, and its second ranking dignitary -- released from prison in 1998 -- is reported to have been detained, harassed and threatened by police on several occasions in 1999-2000. According to the State Department, as of June 30, 2000, there were at least 16 religious prisoners in Vietnam, and possibly more, and numerous other persons had been harassed and detained on account of their faith over the previous year, including UBCV Buddhist monks, Catholic priests, Protestant house church leaders and members, Hoa Hao lay persons and Cao Daists. Five members of the Hoa Hao Buddhist sect, who have been imprisoned since March 28, 2000, were reportedly tried on September 26 on allegations of "defaming the government" and "abusing democracy," which resulted in the sentencing of the defendants to prison terms of one to three years. There are reports that local government officials in the northern part of Vietnam have forced Protestant Christians of the Hmong ethnic group to recant their faith. Reports also indicate that on July 1, 2000, officials of Ho Chi Minh City demolished a church structure on the site where the local Christians were promised permission to build a chapel. In spite of these documented abuses of religious freedom, when high-ranking officials of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs met with me and with Commission Executive Director Steven McFarland in Washington on June 9, 2000, they asserted that there was complete protection of religious freedom in Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese government appears to have taken some positive steps with respect to some religious groups over the past 18 months, it is important to recognize that these steps do not represent substantial or long-term progress toward eliminating religious persecution. The apparatus of state repression and control is still firmly in place and is actively used. The Commission and its staff have met and communicated with representatives of a number of religious communities in Vietnam, and many have implored us not to be misled by the government's recent efforts to appear more tolerant of religious activity. These representatives of victim groups reported that the government's efforts to suppress independent religious activity have actually intensified, although in some cases more subtle and less public means have been used. The United States has been engaged in a process of normalizing diplomatic relations with Vietnam, and has initiated steps toward the normalization of trade relations as well. While the Commission has not yet taken a position on these issues, we stress that the Vietnamese government continues to engage in grave violations of religious freedom. Given the significance of your upcoming visit, the first by a U.S. president in over 30 years, the Commission respectfully recommends that you impress upon Prime Minister Phan Van Kai that the promotion of religious freedom is indispensable to the continuation of healthy and increasingly close relations between Vietnam and the United States. We hope that you use this opportunity to engage the Vietnamese government in serious discussions of religious freedom in Vietnam. Respectfully, Elliott Abrams Chairman

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Vice Chair Rabbi David Saperstein Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Dean Michael K. Young Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director