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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) condemns the detention of human rights lawyer Cu Huy Ha Vu.

“Cu Huy Ha Vu’s arrest is an outrageous affront to the Obama administration’s efforts to improve relations with Vietnam,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. “Secretary Clinton has rightly condemned violence against religious communities and human rights defenders, but it is time for the Obama Administration to back up words with actions, including by re-designating Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).”

Cu Huy Ha Vu represents the residents of Con Dau, a village near DaNang whose residents faced government organized harassment, detention, torture, and arrest for refusing to sell or vacate land — including a long-standing religious burial site — that has been in their village for 135 years to create an eco-tourist resort.

Cu Huy Ha Vu is charged with disseminating “propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” in violation of Article 88 of the penal code, commonly used to arrest dissidents, such as Fr. Nguyen Van Ly and others.

Cu Huy Ha Vu is the latest in a long list of human rights advocates in Vietnam who have faced government persecution for representing vulnerable communities, including religious groups and individuals. Among the lawyers cited in USCIRF Annual Reports on religious freedom conditions in Vietnam include Le Cong Dinh, Nguyen Van Dai, Le Thi Cong Nhan, Le Tran Luat, and Le Quoc Quan.

USCIRF testified at the August 2010 Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on efforts by the Vietnamese government to obtain the property of Con Dau residents and about general religious freedom conditions in Vietnam. The 2010 report and copy of that testimony can be found at www.uscirf.gov.

Mr. Vu's recent efforts on behalf of the Con Dau village case have motivated government authorities to arrest this well known advocate. USCIRF has conducted interviews with Con Dau residents and found credible evidence of intimidation, harassment, restrictions on peaceful religious ceremonies, and torture in detention. As many as 60 people were detained after Con Dau villagers participated in a May 4, 2010 burial ceremony prohibited by the Vietnamese government. Those taken into custody describe beatings, sleep deprivation, and forced confessions. Eyewitnesses also claim that Mr. Nam Nguyen, the Con Dau resident who died after being in police custody, was healthy and working the day before he died. At his funeral, he had extensive bruises on his body, according to eyewitness accounts. Six individuals were tried in Vietnam the week before Secretary Clinton's visit to the Near East Summit in Hanoi. Four of the accused received nine-month suspended jail terms, while two others were sent to jail, respectively for terms of nine months and one year. Mr. Vu was not allowed to represent them at trial.

"Cu Huy Ha Vu should be immediately and unconditionally released," said Leo. "Vietnam has been called the United States' new best friend in Asia, but it continues to trample on individual freedoms and the rule of law without consequence. We should not continue to advance Vietnam's economic and security interests without seeking progress there on U.S. interests in religious freedom and the rule of law."

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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