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WASHINGTON, DC – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today noted the release of human rights lawyer and religious freedom advocate Nguyen Van Dai after serving his four-year sentence and urged the government of Vietnam to lift his administrative or “house arrest” sentence. USCIRF also advocated the unconditional release of Father Nguyen Van Ly, whose medical parole ends next week, after which he could be returned to prison.

“Nguyen Van Dai and the many courageous young advocates like him are Vietnam’s future. It is unfortunate that the Vietnamese government still views them as a threat to its security and stability,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. “Father Ly should be unconditionally released. His arbitrary detention and that of others are utterly unjustified, and have needlessly complicated U.S.-Vietnamese relations for over a decade.”

The Commission met with Nguyen Van Dai and Father Ly in May 2009. At that time, both advocates said that they had refused an offer of reduced sentences if they signed a letter confessing to crimes they never committed and vowed to keep working peacefully for freedom and human rights in Vietnam. USCIRF has visited Vietnam four times since 2003 and testified many times before Congress about its findings. USCIRF wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in January 2011, urging her to redesignate Vietnam as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations.

There continue to be many individuals detained, in prison or under administrative sentence, in Vietnam for their religious activity, religious freedom advocacy, or legal defense of religious communities and individuals including Hoa Hao, Khmer Buddhists, Cao Dai, Montagnard Protestants, Le Cong Dinh, Cu Huy Ha Vu, Venerable Thich Quang Do, Father Phan Van Loi, Le Thi Cong Nhan, and Nguyen Thi Hong.

“Unfortunately, Nguyen Van Dai’s release is hardly a sign of religious freedom improvement in Vietnam,” said Mr. Leo. “Too many severe violations continue, including violence against religious communities, new detentions of religious leaders, harassment of legal advocates, ongoing restrictions of religious practice, and the outrageous beating of a U.S. Embassy official attempting to visit Father Ly. We continue to recommend that the U.S. designate Vietnam as a CPC, a designation that previously produced unmistakable improvements for religious communities without hindering bilateral relations between our two countries.”

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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