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WASHINGTON, DC - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) condemns Vietnam's government for taking Father Nguyen Van Ly, a Roman Catholic priest and religious freedom advocate, from his home in Hue Monday, despite his ill health which requires treatment for several strokes and an apparent brain tumor. Since March 2010, Father Ly has been on medical parole from a sentence he received in May 2007.

"Father Ly should be immediately and unconditionally released, said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. "Less than one week after the United States helps to mediate Vietnam's dispute with China over the South China Sea, Vietnam ignores our government's consistently stated concerns about the treatment of Father Ly - a frail Catholic priest who has peacefully advocated for the fundamental right to freedom of religion - by seizing him without any warning and despite being told by his caretakers that he is not well enough to travel and to be taken back to prison. The Obama Administration cannot maintain a strategy that advances Vietnam's security and economic interests without seeking concrete improvements on U.S. interests in religious freedom and the rule of law. It's time for the Administration to re-designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC)."

The CPC designation is applied to countries with "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom." Vietnam was designated as a CPC from 2004 to 2006 along with such nations as China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Sudan. USCIRF has consistently recommended Vietnam be re-designated as a CPC.

Father Ly is one of Vietnam's most prominent advocates for religious freedom and related human rights. In October 2001, the government sentenced Father Ly to 15 years in prison after he submitted testimony to USCIRF on religious freedom abuses. He was released in 2005 after Vietnam was designated as a CPC and re-arrested in 2007, several months after the Bush Administration lifted the CPC designation. A USCIRF delegation visited Father Ly in prison in May 2009, where he spoke of being held in isolation for more than two years. Father Ly was released on medical parole in March 2010 after suffering several strokes.

The 2011 USCIRF Annual Report found ongoing and severe violations of religious freedom in Vietnam, including the detention of many individuals, in prison or under administrative sentence,

for their religious activity, religious freedom advocacy, or legal defense of religious communities. Those detained include individuals from the Hoa Hao, Khmer Buddhists, Cao Dai, Montagnard Protestants communities and human rights defenders Le Cong Dinh, Cu Huy Ha Vu, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, Father Phan Van Loi, Le Thi Cong Nhan, Nguyen Van Dai and now, reportedly, Father Nguyen Van Ly.

“Re-designating Vietnam as a CPC is not only the right thing to do; it has proven in the past to produce tangible religious freedom improvements on the ground without hindering other bilateral interests,” said Leo. “Most importantly, it will clearly signal that the United States sides with those in Vietnam who peacefully advocate the cause of human freedom.”

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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