

Distinguished Commissioners,

We already know that religious persecution in Vietnam has gotten worse over the past two years, which has landed Vietnam on the Department of State's Special Watch List. I believe that Vietnam deserves to be on the CPC list.

Contributing to this backsliding are three alarming trends: increased forced conversion and renunciation of faith; expanding role of government-controlled churches as instruments of repression; and the government's more frequent use of transnational repression to silence human rights defenders among the Vietnamese diaspora.

In June and July alone, hundreds of Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands have been forced to leave their unregistered churches and join the government-backed Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) – South. An entire congregation of 200 members of the Good News Mission Church in Dak Lak Province ceased to exist due to forced conversion.

Even members of government-approved churches have been forced to renounce their faith. Last month, two Hmong sisters from Nghe An Province fled to Thailand, each with an infant. They had managed to conceal their Christian faith for 5 years before being discovered by their in-laws. Government authorities immediately banished them from their village and threatened them with imprisonment should they return. Their eldest sister had already fled to Thailand months before under similar circumstances. All three sisters are members of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) – North, which has been legally recognized by the government.

The Vietnamese government has increasingly used government-created religious organizations to subdue and/or eliminate religious groups that resist government control.

The Buddhist Church of Vietnam (BCV), created by the government in 1981, is a clear example. In July of last year, the police in Long An Province prosecuted the 90-years old founder of a small Buddhist group named Thien Am Ben Bo Vu Tru (Zen Hermitage on the Edge of the Universe) and five of his disciples based on outrageous allegations by two BCV monks. They were accused of distorting Buddha's teaching, using Buddhist terminologies and wearing Buddhist outfits without BCV's prior approval, and characterizing, in a private conversation, one of these two BCV clerics as ignorant. They were sentenced to a total of 23.5 years in prison. Three human rights lawyers who represented them recently fled to the U.S. to avoid arrest.

The plight of Cao Dai followers has been featured in many USCIRF reports. The Cao Dai Sect, which was created by the government in 1997, has seized over 300

temples from Cao Dai followers, often by violence and with the support of the police. Cao Dai followers attempting to enter their “Holy See” in Tay Ninh have been brutally beaten by members of the 1997 Sect.

The government has also targeted human rights defenders in the Vietnamese diaspora and among the Vietnamese refugee population in Thailand. Four months ago, Vietnam’s Ministry of Public Security announced criminal prosecution against Pastor A Ga, a resident of North Carolina and founder of the Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands. The state-owned Vietnam Television (VTV), which has bureaus in three U.S. cities, has waged a sustained campaign of defamation, hate speech, and threats against Vietnamese American advocates for religious freedom, including myself.

To stop and reverse the ongoing backsliding, human rights, particularly religious freedom, should be an integral part of the U.S. – Vietnam strategic partnership, which would be on the agenda of President Biden’s upcoming state visit to Vietnam. With that in mind, I recommend that:

- (1) The Biden Administration reaches agreement with Vietnam on a framework for systemic reforms that incorporates the principle of reciprocity, specific timelines for implementation, and consequences for non-compliance. Equally important is a mechanism to ensure promised reforms are truly taking place, violations are properly resolved, and affected individuals and communities have a voice.
- (2) USCIRF provides the platform for persecuted religious and ethnic communities in Vietnam so that they have a role and representation in the proposed framework and mechanism. For example, USCIRF can maintain periodic meetings with persecuted churches, bring their issues to the attention of the appropriate US and Vietnamese authorities, and help them to follow through.
- (3) Members of Congress ensure that incidents of transnational repression affecting their constituents be acted upon resolutely by the Administration.
- (4) The Administration, Congress and USCIRF take advantage of Vietnam’s membership in the UN Human Rights Council by capitalizing on recommendations of UN mandate holders to press Vietnam to comply with UN human rights standards, including Article 18 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights.