

Testimony of Michael Cromartie, Vice-Chair
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
Before the
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Mr. Chairman, Members of Congress, thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Congressman Cao, thank you for your eloquent testimony. Your leadership on this issue is most welcome and we hope your voice is clearly heard in both Washington and Hanoi.

I testified nine months ago before this Commission about religious freedom in Vietnam. Sadly, I cannot say that conditions have improved in that time. Vietnam continues to backslide on human rights and there remain too many religious freedom violations, too many individuals detained for independent religious activity or peaceful religious freedom advocacy, too many cases of discrimination and forced renunciations of faith targeting new converts to Protestantism, and too many stories of government approved violence targeting Buddhists and Catholics. These abuses occur despite the protections found in Vietnam's Constitution and despite Vietnam's international obligations under the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

I want to make one point about the work of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). We have traveled to Vietnam four times since 2003 and have visited every region of Vietnam. We have detailed the abuses experienced by Vietnam's sizable Christian population (10%-12%). But we have also tried to document the severe religious freedom restrictions experienced by Buddhists, including the ethnic Khmer and indigenous groups such as Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. Vietnam is primarily a Buddhist country. Severe religious freedom restrictions touch every religious community in Vietnam, not only the religious minorities.

Example of repression of Vietnam's Buddhist and indigenous religions:

- the detention of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam's leaders, including the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do and the intimidation of Buddhists who attend temples associated with the UBCV or engage in UBCV youth organizations;
- The intimidation of Buddhist monks and nuns and the effective disbandment of the order associated with Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh;
- The active suppression of independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups, including the continued imprisonment of more than a dozen Hoa Hao and Cao Dai for publicly demonstrating against religious freedom restrictions and;
- The serious restrictions faced by ethnic Khmer Buddhists in southern Vietnam, including the banning of essential religious ceremonies and the 2007 arrest and imprisonment of five Khmer Buddhists for demonstrating publicly against those restrictions. Now released and living as refugees in Europe, these young monks tell horrific stories of being beaten or mistreated everyday during their incarcerations.

You can view all of USCIRF's Vietnam reports online at www.uscirf.gov.

Recent Releases of Prisoners

We should welcome today the recent releases of Fr. Nguyen Van Ly and Le Thi Cong Nhan. These prominent dissidents have been released from prison but not from intimidation and house arrest. Their release should not be viewed as evidence that Vietnam is making real progress on a number of human rights concerns.

There continue to be dozens of individuals detained in Vietnam for their religious activity and religious freedom advocacy, including Montagnard Protestants, members of independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, a Mennonite pastor, and lawyer Nguyen Van Dai. There also are individuals who live under severe restrictions and house arrest orders, including the leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Catholic Father Phan Van Loi, and the human rights lawyers who take politically charged cases.

Hanoi continues to view peaceful advocacy for rights, reform, and the rule of law as challenges to its power. Detentions and arrests of peaceful dissidents will continue to complicate U.S.-Vietnam relations. We urge the Vietnamese government to release all prisoners of conscience. Hopefully, Hanoi can begin to see peaceful advocates, like Father Ly and Le Thi Cong Nhan, as representing the best of Vietnam's bright future, not a threat to its political power.

I was privileged to have met both of these courageous advocates in prison. In May, 2009 I met a healthy and vigorous Father Ly and talked with him for almost an hour. Last year, he suffered several strokes and was released from prison only last week. We are glad Fr. Ly was released on humanitarian grounds. Unfortunately, his release is conditional. He will be jailed again once his health improves.

USCIRF advocated strongly for Father Ly's unconditional release and for him to receive needed medical care. We urge the Vietnamese government to fully commute his sentence and allow him to return to his life's calling, peacefully advocating for religious freedom and related rights in Vietnam.

Last week the interviews given by Le Thi Cong Nhan's deeply moved me. She said bluntly that her time in prison "confirmed her faith in the peaceful struggle for human rights and democracy." These are the same sentiments she expressed to me when I met her in 2007. She gave me a ring with the words "Democracy" woven into the fabric. It remains one of my prized possessions and my hope for Vietnam's future.

U.S. policy and programs must stand firmly with those peacefully seeking greater freedoms and guaranteed rights in Vietnam. Our diplomacy must send the clear message that U.S. interests in Vietnam are not only economic, but affirm the universal desire to speak freely, worship without fear, and organize openly without suffering persecution. This is a message that will be heard and give hope to millions of the Vietnamese people.

Recommendations:

Vietnam should be an obvious priority of the Obama Administration and Congress. Both have an important role to play in advancing human rights and religious freedom, civil society and the rule of law in Vietnam. The diplomatic tools are available, the United States has considerable leverage to define the bilateral relationship, and the United States is popular with many young Vietnamese.

The questions remains: is there sufficient political will to press Vietnam on human rights?

Recently, Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell stated publicly that Vietnam was “backsliding” on human rights and religious freedom. Hopefully, the Administration is starting to reflect the views President Obama expressed as a Senator, when he urged the Bush Administration to “ensure that the Vietnamese people are guaranteed their rights to belief and conscience....and [to] be a strong voice for the human rights of the Vietnamese people.”

One way the Obama Administration can ensure that the Vietnamese people are guaranteed religious freedom is to re-designate Vietnam as a “Country of Particular Concern” or CPC. When used in the past, the CPC designation produced tangible improvements on the ground and did not hinder progress on other bilateral issues. In fact, trade, investment, humanitarian programs, and military relations expanded during the period when Vietnam was a CPC. The CPC designation can be used again to bring concrete change.

The CPC recommendation has widespread, bipartisan support in Congress. We want to thank Members who have consistently advocated and written letters to support re-designating Vietnam as a CPC. The State Department is currently considering whether or not to designate Vietnam as a CPC, so the time is ripe for focused congressional engagement on this issue. USCIRF will continue to work, with the support of those in this room, toward that goal.

The Obama Administration can also be a stronger voice for human rights in Vietnam by signaling its support for passage of the Vietnam Human Rights Act. This bill has been re-introduced in both the House and the Senate this year. USCIRF supports the provisions found in this bill and hopes it will be discussed, considered, and passed during the current session of Congress, with the Obama Administration’s full support.

Protecting and promoting religious freedom is a core interest of the American people and critical to the success of many of our global interests. We believe that

the CPC designation and the Vietnam Human Rights Act contain powerful tools to spotlight abuses of religious freedom and related rights, encourage future improvements, and clearly signal that the U.S. supports those in Vietnam who seek to advance both prosperity and guaranteed rights.