

Rallying For Democracy

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Open letter to the US Government on the deteriorating Human Rights situation in Vietnam

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On the occasion of Vietnam Human Rights Day, we wish to draw your attention to the sharply deteriorating human rights situation in that country. We call on you to insist that the Vietnamese government end its persecution of citizens trying to exercise their rights to free expression and assembly.

In particular we are concerned about the recent slew of arrests of writers, religious leaders, trade union activists, and dissidents advocating peaceful democratic reforms and respect for human rights.

Just a few of those recently detained or imprisoned are:

* Novelist Tran Khai Thanh Thuy was arrested on April 21 and charged under article 88 of the penal code for "carrying out propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam";

* Catholic Father Nguyen Van Ly was sentenced on March 30, 2007 under article 88 to eight years in prison.

* Lawyer Le Quoc Quan, who had returned from a fellowship at the National Endowment for Democracy in the United States,

was arrested on March 8 and charged with violating article 79 of the penal code, "attempting to overthrow the people's government"; Quan has not been seen or heard from since his arrest.

* Lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, one of Vietnam's few practicing human rights lawyers and founder of the Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam, was arrested on March 6 in Hanoi. Dai and another attorney arrested at the same time, Le Thi Cong Nhan, are scheduled for trial on May 11, charged under article 88.

* Buddhist monk Thich Thich Thien Mien, who formed an association of former political and religious prisoners following his release in 2005 after 26 years in prison, was called for interrogation in March on accusations of anti-government activities, signaling that he may be arrested soon.

* Tran Quoc Hien, spokesperson of an independent trade union, United Workers-Farmers Organization of Vietnam (UWFO), was arrested in January.

* Cyber-dissident Truong Quoc Huy is expected to go to trial soon, was charged under article 258 with "abusing democratic freedoms";

These people join journalist Nguyen Vu Binh, 9 or more members of the Cao Dai religion, 10 Hoa Hao Buddhists, and more than 350 ethnic minority Montagnard Christians currently serving long prison sentences for politically motivated charges. They include:

* Siu Boch, a Montagnard religious leader and lands rights activist was arrested on March 10, 2001, after a police raid on a peaceful prayer meeting in Plei Lao, Gia Lai, in which riot police killed one villager and burned down the local church. He is serving an eight-year sentence in Ha Nam prison, north of Hanoi.

* Y Tim Bya, an Montagnard pastor serving a ten-year sentence. He was arrested and forcibly deported from Cambodia in December 2001 along with 167 other Central Highlanders trying to seek asylum. Y Thim is listed on the Vietnamese government's 2002 roster of pastors and evangelists from Dak Lak.

We are concerned not just by the sheer number of arrests, but by the fact that they constitute an effort on the part of the Vietnamese government to destroy the country's nascent dialogue on democracy.

There is a widespread perception that Vietnam is undergoing a gradual political liberalization. Although there is a quickening pace of economic and social change and a widening margin for discussion of economic issues, the government continues to brutally repress people who publicly advocate for democracy and human rights.

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We note that minor reforms by the Vietnamese government regarding religious freedom – for example, streamlined procedures for religious organizations to register with the government – have been made at the expense of other fundamental rights. Some churches have been able to register, but those in politicized ethnic minority areas, as well as church leaders such as Catholic Father Ly, Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang, and Buddhist leader Ven. Thich Quang Do — who take up the cause of political and civil rights – are harassed, arrested, imprisoned, or placed under house arrest.

Unfortunately, the US government has insufficiently raised its voice on these important matters. While we appreciate US Ambassador Michael Marine's recent efforts to publicly show the US government's concern about the jailing of dissidents, the Bush administration should take stronger action and urge the Vietnamese government to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release all persons in Vietnam who are being held for the peaceful expression of their political or religious views. Their cases should be raised publicly when senior US officials visit Vietnam or when senior Vietnamese officials visit the United States.
2. Amend or repeal provisions of Vietnamese legislation, such as the Criminal Code and Ordinance on Religion, that restrict and criminalize the right to peaceful dissent and membership in independent religious groups. The government should also end the restrictions on gatherings of religious groups that are not registered with the government, release clergy including Buddhist monks who have been placed under house arrest, abolish the practice of forced recantations of faith and pressure to affiliate with officially registered religious organizations, and bring an end to abusive police surveillance and harassment of religious leaders and followers.
3. Bring press laws into compliance with Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Vietnam ratified in 1982.
4. Remove restrictions on Internet usage that improperly restrict freedom of expression and information, and release people imprisoned for peaceful dissemination of their views over the Internet.
5. Permit individuals the right to associate freely and peacefully with others of similar views regardless of whether those views run counter to the political or ideological views approved by the Communist Party and the government.
6. Conduct penal, legal, and court proceedings with greater transparency and accountability. Publicly announce trials and charges in advance of trial proceedings. Guarantee that trials are held in accordance with international fair trial standards set forth in Article 14 of ICCPR. The trials should be public and open to Vietnamese citizens, international observers, and independent monitors. Those accused should have access to legal counsel of their choosing and the free assistance of an interpreter where necessary, as mandated by both the ICCPR and Vietnam's Constitution.
7. Allow increased diplomatic visits to religious and dissident figures under house arrest and to regions where human rights abuses are consistently reported such as the central and northern highlands.

If these steps are vigorously undertaken and there is no positive change, the US should consider putting Vietnam back on its list of "Countries of Particular Concern" for religious freedom violations. The US should also seriously evaluate whether to continue the annual human rights dialogue with Vietnam if no concrete action is immediately taken by the Vietnamese government.

Signatories:

1. Human Rights Watch.
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2. Freedom Now.
 3. Asian American Initiative
 4. The Laogai Research Foundation(Mr. Harry Wu)
 5. The Lao New Generation Democracy Movement
 6. Alliance For Democracy in Asia.
 7. Wei Jingsheng Foundation
 8. The Venerable Thich khong Tanh (Vietnam)
 9. Bloc 8406 (Vietnam)
 10. Alliance For Democracy and Human Rights in Vietnam (Vietnam)
 11. Vietnamese Political And Religious Prisoners Friendship Association (VPRPFA)(Vietnam).
 12. Group of Archbishop Nguyen Kim Dien: Fathers Nguyen Van Ly, Phan Van Loi, Nguyen Huu Giai, Chan Tin (Vietnam)
 13. Writer Do Nam Hai (Vietnam)
 15. Professor Nguyen Chinh Ket
 16. Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang (Saigon, Vietnam)
 17. Nguyen Kim Anh (Vietnam)
 18. Professor Tran Khue (Vietnam).
 19. Mr. Hoang Minh Chinh (Hanoi, Vietnam)
 20. Mr. Pham Que Duong (Hanoi, Vietnam).
 21. Journalist Nguyen Khac Toan (Hanoi, Vietnam).
 22. Writer Hoang Tien (Hanoi, Vietnam)
 23. Professor Nguyen Thanh Giang (Hanoi, Vietnam).
 24. Mrs. Bui Kim Ngan (wife of journalist Nguyen Vu Binh. Hanoi, Vietnam).
 25. Mrs. Vu Minh Khanh (Wife of Lawyer Nguyen Van Dai. Hanoi, Vietnam).
 26. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Nghe (Mother of Lawyer Tran Khai Thanh Thuy. Hanoi, Vietnam).
 27. Nun Dam Giang (North Vietnam).
 28. Mr. Pham Van Troi (Hanoi. Vietnam).
 29. Ms. Vu Thanh Phuong (Hanoi, Vietnam).
 30. Ms. Le Thi kim Thu (Hanoi. Vietnam)
 31. Venerable Monk Thich thien Minh President of The VPRPFA(Vietnam).
 32. The Most Venerable Monk Thich Nhat Ban Advisor to the VPRPFA (Vietnam).
 33. Professor Truong Minh Nguyet, Vice President of VPRPFA (Vietnam).
 34. Mr. Tran Huu Duyen , Hoa Hao Buddhist Church (Vietnam).
 35. Professor Nguyen Manh Bao, Representative of The Cao Dai Church (Vietnam).
 36. The Venerable Thich khong Tanh (Vietnam)
 37. Dr. Nguyen Dan Que: Founder of the Non Violent movement For HR in Vietnam(Viet Nam)
 38. Dr. Pham Hong son, Vietnamese Human Rights Activist (Vietnam)
 39. Vietnam Human Rights Network
 40. Vietnamese Physicians For Human Rights
 41. Vietnamese Physicians of the Free world
 42. Vietnamese Community of Montreal, Canada
 43. Movement of Performing Artists and Writers for a future Vietnam.
 44. Vietnamese Physicians For Human Rights.
 45. Vietnamese Americans Congress
 46. People's Democratic Party
 47. Vietnamese Nationalist Party
 48. Vietnam Reform Party
 49. Nguyen Huu Thong, Attorney At Law, President of The Lawyers Committee For People's Rights.
 50. Tran Thanh Hiep, Lawyer, President of the Vietnam Center For Human Rights (France).
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- 51. Women For Human Rights in Vietnam.
- 53. International Committee For Freedom to Support The Non Violent Movement For HR in Vietnam.
- 54. Rallying For Democracy
- 55. Nguyen Tien Canh, M.D. Vietnamese Human Rights Activist, Florida, USA
- 56. Mr. Nguyen Chi Thien, Former Political Prisoner, Vietnamese Human Rights Activist.
- 57. Thieu Do, M.D. Vietnamese HR activist (Virginia).
- 58. Dr. Binh The Nguyen, Vietnamese HR activist (Virginia).
- 59. Dr. Hai Van Tran
- 60. Quan Nguyen M.D., Vietnamese HR activist (Virginia).