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One Hundred and Fourteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

August 5th, 2015

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We welcome your raising of human rights concerns at the recent meeting with Mr. Nguyen Phu Trong, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, during his first visit to the United States. As you reach Hanoi to celebrate the 20-year anniversary of the opening of the U.S. embassy in post-war Vietnam, we urge you to raise the issue of Vietnam's imprisonment of prisoners of conscience. It is time for the Vietnamese leadership to act and demonstrate their good faith by releasing all prisoners of conscience without conditions, as part of their Independence Day (September 2nd) amnesty.

As you know, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission launched the Defending Freedoms Project in December 2012 to encourage Members of Congress to adopt prisoners of conscience worldwide, advocating for their unconditional release and raising public awareness about ongoing persecution against human rights defenders overall. Vietnam has by far the most prisoners of conscience adopted through this project, an indication of the growing concern among Members of Congress regarding the large number of human rights defenders being held in Vietnamese prisons.

President Obama recently reasserted the Administration's position that Vietnam must fully respect workers' freedom to form unions in order to take part in the Trans-Pacific Partnership. However, labor organizers such as Doan Huy Chuong and Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung are on the long list of Vietnamese prisoners of conscience. Their release would be a positive sign that the Vietnamese government intends to comply with labor rights provisions in the TPP.

In late June the President signed legislation to reauthorize Trade Promotion Authority into law, which contains a provision stipulating that freedom of religion be an objective of trade negotiations, including the TPP negotiations. Many Vietnamese prisoners of conscience were arrested and sentenced because of their faith and/or religious activities. Father Nguyen Van Ly, Pastor Duong Kim Khai and Mr. Nguyen Van Minh are such prisoners of conscience who are included in the Defending Freedom Project. There are many more like them in Vietnamese prisons.

For twenty years the United States government has cultivated a close relationship with the government of Vietnam, yet Vietnam remains a one-party state and treats many of its own citizens – particularly those who share the U.S. commitment to freedom and democracy – in ways that are clearly inconsistent with minimum international human rights standards.


We look forward to Vietnam's coming Independence Day celebration and welcome reports of another mass amnesty for prisoners. Although any interpretation of international law would make the granting of "amnesty" to a prisoner of conscience a non sequitur, we believe an offer of an unconditional release during the amnesty process is the most pragmatic approach to securing their freedom. Given the growing relationship between our two governments, as evidenced in the forthcoming TPP agreement, including Vietnam's prisoners of conscience among those who will receive amnesty is not only fitting at this critical juncture, but also necessary if Vietnam aspires to membership in the community of law-abiding nations.

We hope that you will join us in calling for the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience, and look forward to continuing to work with you in defending the fundamental freedoms of people across the globe.

Sincerely,



Joseph R. Pitts
Co-Chair, TLHRC



James P. McGovern
Co-Chair, TLHRC