

United States Senate

August 5, 2015

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
ENERGY AND NATURAL
RESOURCES
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,
AND PENSIONS
VETERANS' AFFAIRS
JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE

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

Dear Secretary Kerry:

I thank you for raising concerns regarding the human rights conditions in Vietnam at your recent meeting with Mr. Nguyen Phu Trong, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, during his first ever visit last month to the United States. I understand that you will be in Hanoi later this week to celebrate the 20-year anniversary of the opening of the U.S. embassy in post-war Vietnam and mark 20 years of diplomatic relations. I urge you to direct attention to the plight of all prisoners of conscience in Vietnam during your visit.

As you know, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission launched the Defending Freedoms Project in December 2012 to encourage Members of the U.S. Congress to adopt cases of prisoners of conscience from around the world, advocate for their releases, and increase awareness to the human rights conditions in the countries where these prisoners are being detained. Prisoners from Vietnam are by far the most adopted through this project. This is an indication of the growing concern among Members of Congress toward the large number of human rights defenders being held in Vietnamese prisons. I have the privilege to champion Ms. Bui Thi Minh Hang and advocate for her immediate and unconditional release.

Ms. Minh Hang is a prominent human rights defender known for her peaceful activities to promote freedom of information, support independent religious groups, and speak out for farmers whose lands have been wrongfully expropriated by the Vietnamese government. She has been detained since February 11, 2014 after being beaten while en route with fellow activists to visit a former prisoner of conscience. In a closed, one-day trial on August 26, 2014, she was sentenced to three years in prison with the charge of "causing public disorder". Since her arrest on that February day, she has been on several hunger strikes to protest against the arbitrary arrest and harsh treatment by prison guards, who reportedly have attempted to incite hostility toward her amongst her cellmates. I am worried for Ms. Minh Hang's deteriorating health as well as her poor treatment in prison. In May of this year, she was denied contact with her family and lawyer for about three months. Prison officials claimed her refusal to wear prison uniform as the reason for denying family visitation, but they failed to provide a reason for rejecting the visitation request from her lawyer.

In late June, President Obama signed the Trade Promotion Authority Act into law. This law contains a provision stipulating freedom of religion be an objective of trade negotiations, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in which Vietnam is a negotiating member.

Unfortunately, many independent religious practitioners in Vietnam have been arrested because they chose not to submit themselves to the state-sanctioned religious organizations. Father Nguyen Van Ly, Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, Pastor Duong Kim Khai, and Mr. Nguyen Van Minh are among such religious prisoners. Their cases are also being highlighted in the Defending Freedoms Project.

President Obama also recently re-asserted the Administration's position that Vietnam must fully respect workers' freedom to form independent unions in order to take part in the TPP. Ironically, labor activists such as Mr. Doan Huy Chuong and Mr. Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung remain in prison for their peaceful campaigns to protect workers. Their cases, too, have been recognized by the Defending Freedoms Project. Their immediate releases would serve as a positive sign that the Vietnamese government is serious about complying with the labor rights provisions as it negotiates the TPP with the United States and other civilized countries.

As the Vietnamese government prepares to observe the country's Independence Day on September 2nd, I urge you to call for the immediate and unconditional release of Ms. Bui Thi Minh Hang and all other prisoners of conscience that are less known, but no less important, who are languishing behind bars for the crime of defending basic rights for themselves and for their fellow countrymen and women.

Sincerely,



Bill Cassidy, M.D.

U.S. Senator