

February 10, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are writing to ask that you make human rights a priority at the upcoming U.S.-ASEAN summit in Sunnylands, California. Specifically, we urge you to raise concerns with the Vietnamese delegation over their government's pattern of serious violations of internationally recognized human rights, particularly the right to freedom of religion or belief.

After twenty years of diplomatic relations with the United States and billions of dollars in U.S. trade and investment, the government of Vietnam continues to treat its own citizens – particularly those who promote respect for human rights and democracy – in ways that suggest a renewed US commitment to stand up for human rights in Vietnam is needed. Particularly troubling is the recent arrest of human rights lawyer and former prisoner of conscience Nguyen Van Dai. He was first arrested and imprisoned in 2007 for defending freedom of religion and calling for the democratization of Vietnamese society. Ironically, not long before his most recent arrest on December 16, 2015, Dai publicly supported Vietnam's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

As Vietnam aggressively seeks to expand trade with the United States, your administration should insist that Vietnam unconditionally free all of the hundreds of people imprisoned for peaceful expression of their opinions and beliefs, such as religious freedom activists Father Nguyen Van Ly, Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, Hoa Hao Buddhists Bui Van Trung and Nguyen Van Minh, and Khmer Krom Buddhist monks Lieu Ny and Thach Thuol; democracy campaigners Bui Thi Minh Hang and Tran Huynh Duy Thuc; labor rights activists Doan Huy Chuong and Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung; and Montagnard Christians Runh, Jonh, and Y Ngun Knul; young Catholic activists Dang Xuan Dieu, Ho Duc Hoa, and Nguyen Dang Minh Man; cyber dissident Ngo Hao. We also request that you press Vietnam to honor its obligations as a state party to both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Convention Against Torture by taking immediate steps to end pervasive police torture and mistreatment of prisoners and detainees.

We also urge you to press Vietnam to repeal all laws and administrative decrees that deny freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and religious belief, and that serve as the basis for the detention and imprisonment of religious leaders and human rights advocates – such as the provisions that criminalize “propaganda against the state,” “undermining national unity” and “taking advantage of the rights to democracy and freedom to infringe upon the interests of the state.” Instead, Vietnam should enact laws codifying and protecting the fundamental human rights the government now routinely violates. We hope you will also make clear that Vietnam

must stop arresting pro-democracy bloggers and others who use the Internet to criticize the government and that it must release those who have been imprisoned.

Persecution of those who are members of independent religious communities is also an alarming issue. Types of persecution vary, and range from harassment tactics, such as the government shutting off electricity in a village dominated by a particular religion or religious community, to physical beatings of leaders by the police. Local authorities have at times reportedly resorted to using beatings and torture to force people to renounce their faith. Vietnam should be encouraged to create a safe environment for all to freely practice their faith without interference, and should punish government officials who fail to protect freedom of conscience and religion.

A new Law on Religion and Belief currently under consideration by Vietnam's National Assembly will perpetuate the already repressive situation. The draft law places burdensome registration requirements on religious organizations, while allowing excessive state control and interference by the government into the affairs of religious organizations.

The draft law also includes ambiguous language that we fear could be used to further religious discrimination. The draft law allows authorities to suspend religious festivities and activities for the reason of "national defense or security, public order, social order, or public health." The draft law does not outline the circumstances under which this can be enforced, and we fear this vague language may lead to arbitrary suspensions of religious activities, particularly by ethnic minority and independent religious groups.

It is essential that the Vietnam government eliminate the onerous requirement that all religious organizations submit to close supervision by the government as a precondition for conducting worship services and other activities. The government should not determine the content of religious education and training, nor should it be allowed to appoint religious leadership. We ask that you urge the Vietnam government to redraft the law in ways that recognize freedom of religion is a basic human right that is not conditional on approval by the government; otherwise that draft law should be completely abandoned.

Similarly, we urge you to press the Vietnamese government to permit the existence of genuinely independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Should Vietnam move forward with its first-ever law on association, provisions allowing genuinely-independent NGOs must be included in the law. Civil society in Vietnam continues to be constrained through various restrictions on civil society groups, and by government efforts to cement control over civil society by creating dozens of sympathetic government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) controlled by the Communist Party or its constituent entities including the Fatherland Front and the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO).

Finally, the Vietnam government must also allow workers to form labor unions that are truly independent of the government and of the Communist Party. It must also end the practice of forced labor and prosecute officials of state-owned labor export companies that are involved in human trafficking. The Vietnam government uses forced labor in "rehabilitation" centers, detention centers, and prisons, and looks the other way at abuses in its labor export program that

result in some of its citizens being forced into modern-day slavery in countries around the world, and fails to protect victims from retaliation when they object to such treatment.

We hope you will make clear to the Vietnamese leaders attending the U.S.-ASEAN Summit in Sunnylands that further expansion of the United States trade and security relationship with Vietnam will not be acceptable to your administration, to Congress, or to the American people unless it is contingent upon significant, verifiable and irreversible improvements in human rights practices.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

Organizations:

21st Century Wilberforce Initiative

Advisory Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Advocates International

Boat People SOS (BPSOS)

Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam (CAT-VN)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Civil Rights Defenders

Coalition for a Free and Democratic Vietnam

Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia (CAMSA)

Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Con Dau Parishioners Association

Council of Indigenous Peoples in Today's Vietnam

Counterparts

Human Rights Lawyers Network Without Frontiers

Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Without Frontiers International

International Office of Champa

Jubilee Campaign USA

Montagnard Human Rights Organization

National Vietnam & Gulf War Veterans Coalition

Popular Bloc of Cao Dai Religion, Overseas Representative Office

Red Eagle Enterprises

The Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church of America

Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)

VETO! Human Rights Defenders Network

Vietnamese American Community of the USA

Vietnam Human Rights Network

Vietnamese Women for Human Rights, Overseas Representative Office

Women for Human Rights in Vietnam

Individuals:

Dr. Cu Huy Ha Vu, former political prisoner
Northwestern University School of Law

Le Thi Kim Thu, land rights activist and former prisoner of conscience
San Diego, California

Pham Tran Anh, Friendship Association of Former Political and Religious Prisoners
Orange County, California

Ta Phong Tan, independent blogger and former prisoner of conscience
Orange County, California

Vu Hoang Hai, Bloc 8406 member and former prisoner of conscience
Orange County, California

William C. Walsh, Human Rights Attorney
Washington DC