**Statement of Dr. Nguyen Dinh Thang, CEO & President of BPSOS**

Press Conference

May 6, 2014

Next week, the US government will host in Washington DC the 18th human rights dialogue with its Vietnamese counterpart.

A dark cloud already hangs over that dialogue: Yesterday, the Vietnamese government arrested Anh Ba Sam, one of the most well-known bloggers, and his collaborator Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh, under Article 258: taking advantage of democratic freedoms in order to violate the interests of the State.

We welcome the recent release of five prisoners of conscience, including Dr. Cu Huy Ha Vu who is with us today. This shows that international pressure did work. However, there are still at least 400 others still in prison. Worse yet, their rank keeps growing: Within the first four months of this year, at least nine dissidents have been sentenced to prison terms and an equal number placed into police custody.

This is a direct result of a short-sighted approach. Our Administration focuses on a short list of prisoners of conscience, negotiating their release and hoping to replace those released with other names. This piecemeal approach encourages the Vietnamese government to speculate in prisoners of conscience, using them as bargaining chips to extract concessions from our government and the free world. We will always be on the short end of the stick.

Our government should adopt a consistent, comprehensive approach by conditioning expansion of trade and security relations with Vietnam on the unconditional release of all imprisoned dissidents, the dismantling of its instruments of repression disguised as laws and decrees, and its acceptance of an independent civil society.

Specifically, at the negotiating table next week the U.S. delegation should:

* Present a full list of prisoners of conscience to the Vietnamese side and use it as the benchmark to measure Vietnam’s progress in human rights;
* Challenge the Vietnamese government to repeal laws that contradict UN human rights conventions that it has signed and that violate the very freedoms that its Constitution has guaranteed;
* Press the Vietnamese government to immediately introduce laws that criminalize all acts of torture and prosecute all government or government-supported agents that commit acts of torture.

At the same time, we call on the U.S. Congress to pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act and Vietnam Human Rights Sanctions Act, to expand the Defending Freedom Project where members of Congress adopt one or two prisoners of conscience each, and to demand that human rights violations be addressed as part of the on-going Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations with Vietnam.