

Statement of Rev. Phan Van Loi

Before the

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on the Persecution of Religious and Indigenous Communities in Vietnam

Wednesday, March 26, 2014

2:00 PM - 4:00 PM

HVC 210

Distinguished members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Ladies and gentlemen,

First, I would like to apologize for not being present in person because the government has placed me under surveillance and restricted my movements.

On the occasion that Tom Lantos Human Rights Committee organizes this hearing on the role of religious organizations in building the civil society in Viet Nam, I would like to offer a brief testimony as followed:

1. The favorable factors of Catholic organizations in building civil society

The Catholic Church, with its existing structure in the form of dioceses, parishes, religious communities and different committees, can play a favorable and beneficial role in building society and country. Before 1975, in the South of Viet Nam, there existed many organizations such as Catholic Scouts, Catholic Student and Youths Movement, Catholic Young Workers, charity organizations such as Caritas, Misereor, social organizations such as Movement on Justice and Peace, Movement Against Corruption, Committee on Improving Prison Conditions.

2. Current restrictions and difficulties that these organizations are facing in their works on religion and mission to serve society.

After 1975, that is, after the Communist party took over the government in the South and built an atheist, dictatorial, totalitarian government, all the above social organizations stopped functioning. There remained only operational structure internal to dioceses, parishes, religious orders, but they have always been spied on and interfered with in their functions. Many bishops, priests, religious, and lay people were imprisoned. At the present time, a few social organizations try to recover and work quietly, for example, Catholic Scouts, Caritas Charity, Committee on Justice and Peace. A number of Catholic religious leaders organized a group called Nguyen Kim Dien Priests Group to combat for religious freedom, democracy and human rights since 2001. Some participates in the Viet Nam Interfaith Council.

These civil society organizations are active in both theory and practice. In theory, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Viet Nam sent recommendation letters to the government, petitions to the Prime Minister and Central Committee on Religious Affairs, open letters to legislative offices, viewpoints on certain social issues, and most recently viewpoints about the state of Viet Nam's society and recommended amendments to the Vietnamese Constitution. The Committee on Justice and Peace organized teaching sessions for the faithful on Catholic Social doctrines; researched on political, economic, social, human rights issues in VN; and occasionally voiced against injustice in society.

Nguyen Kim Dien Priests Group has published more than 100 writings on religious freedom, democracy, and human rights. Different interfaith councils have issued statements on the policy of the communist government towards religions, call for democracy for Viet Nam, and comments on amending the Constitution, on the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, and on human rights violations. Furthermore, the Human Life Protection Group in the Diocese of Vinh, the Catholic Media group, and the Justice and Peace Office of the Redemptorist Order have had many activities relating to the media and society. However, all these statements and activities never received a serious response from the government of VN. On the contrary, the government created more difficulties and obstacles. For example, Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet was removed from the Archdiocese of Hanoi. Bishop Hoang Duc Oanh was harassed. The Redemptorist community has always been spied on and prohibited in their activities. Many priests and lay people are imprisoned for speaking out for justice and truth.

In the meantime, many practical activities of the Catholic church are limited or forbidden by the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the decree on the ordinance's implementation. These two documents aim to prohibit and limit 5 aspects or elements of religious activities; namely, legal status, personnel, activities, properties, and international relationship. That means up to this point, religion and religious organizations are not recognized as legal entities. Leadership personnel have always been controlled by the government from recruitment activities, formation, ordination, and assignment. All purely religious activities or social services must have the permission of the government, are restricted, and prohibited from extending their influence to the outside society. Properties of the Catholic Church have been increasingly confiscated. Land can only be used, but not owned by the Church. International relationship of the Church and the travel abroad of church members and clergy members are strictly controlled by the government, sometimes prohibited. As a result, it is difficult for faith-based civil society organizations to function. Additionally, the government created a fake civil society organization, namely, the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics, a member of the Fatherland Front, to manipulate the internal affairs of the Catholic Church and deceive the outside world.

With regard to other religions, the government has created the "state-controlled" churches side-by-side the orthodox or traditional churches. These "state-controlled" churches are directed by the government, with the purpose of manipulating and dividing the traditional churches. These "state-controlled" churches also participate in the Fatherland Front, serving as peripheral entities of the communist party. The Fatherland Front consists of synthetic civil society organizations.

3. Intentions for implementation over 12 months to change the current conditions

Religious leaders, including many Catholic priests, who gathered on May 1, 2013, under the Viet Nam Interfaith Council, strongly demanded the National Assembly to adopt a Constitution that values citizen rights and human rights. On Oct 4, 2013, we strongly refuted the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the related decree on its implementation. Recently, on Feb 17, 2014, we issued the statement on human rights and prisoners of conscience in Viet Nam. We will soon prepare the by-laws for the Viet Nam Interfaith Council so that we can rightly and boldly function. Many religious leaders who were imprisoned under the communist government, including myself, just united to form the Association of Former Vietnamese Prisoners of Conscience, with the purpose to break yoke of dictatorship of the regime.

4. Suggestions to the United States government, especially the US Congress, and the international community, to support for our efforts.

In Viet Nam, since early 2013 many new independent civil society organizations began and continue to form, despite the suppression and prohibition from the government. These are the efforts of the free citizens to regain independence in social activities, in organizing groups and associations, in the act of serving others and in political opinions. We hope that the US government, especially the US Congress, and the international community to pay close attention to the formation and the operation of such civil society organizations, and to support us in both morale and political aspects.

I thank you for listening. May God bless you and your country.

Rev. Peter Phan van Loi