

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE

Washington, D.C.

August 1, 2014

The Honorable Bob Corker
Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
SD-425 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Corker,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners to seek our government's focused attention on the persecuted religious communities in Vietnam. We understand that some members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will travel to Vietnam next week.

This would be a timely occasion to meet with leaders and knowledgeable members of persecuted religious communities including Catholics, Montagnard Protestants, Hmong Protestants, Khmer Krom Buddhists, Khmer Krom Protestants, Caodaiists, Hoa Hao Buddhists and followers of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or of Belief is scheduled to conclude his country visit to Vietnam on July 31 and preliminary findings are to be presented at a press conference in Hanoi the same day. These findings would serve as good background information for the Senate delegation to tap in.

In Vietnam, persecution against religious communities has become aggravated since early 2007 and significantly worsened since January 2013, when Decree 92/2012/ND-CP (Directives and measures for implementing the Ordinance on beliefs and religion) took effect. On the basis of this decree, local authorities require that all religious group activities be registered and pre-approved unless they are officiated by a religious organization that has been formally registered for religious operation.

The catch is that the government selectively registers only those organizations that it has created or those that have agreed to comply with its control measures. The government has reportedly used these registered organizations to subdue and suppress independent religious groups.

For example, the government abolished the leadership of the Cao Dai Church and the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, and entirely outlawed the Unified Buddhist Church. In their stead, it created the Cao Dai Governance Council, the Hoa Hao Buddhist Administrative Council and the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha as instruments to control and suppress independent followers. Since 2013 there have been many reported incidents of police harassment, beating, and detention of members of these religious communities.

Between 2001 and 2004 the government razed, burned or shut down over 4,000 Montagnard Christian house churches in the Central Highlands alone. Hundreds of their leaders are still in prison. About one thousand Hmong Christian house churches in the Northwest Mountainous Region have been outlawed. Since 2005 the government has approved scores of Protestant

churches that have shown compliance. After being approved for registration even churches that were once independent no longer speak out in support of their own affiliates that continue to be persecuted. The number of registered religious organizations makes up less than 5% of the number of unregistered ones.

By reporting the increase in the number of registered religious organizations/congregations – there are only about 200 of them at this time, the Vietnamese government gives the false impression of greater tolerance towards religions. In reality it has only increased its control of religious activities.

The Vietnamese government should repeal Decree 92 in order to show its true respect for the right of citizens to conduct religious activities in informal settings. This should serve as the key benchmark to measure progress in religious freedom in Vietnam.

As another benchmark, our government should present the Vietnamese government a list of independent religious organizations of concern. The percentage of such organizations becoming registered would be more reflective of genuine progress.

Besides meeting religious leaders and knowledgeable members of the persecuted religious communities, we also recommend that the Senate delegation visits some members of these persecuted religious communities who are currently in prison. Attached is a partial list of such prisoners of conscience.

We would greatly appreciate your consideration of our recommendations. Thank you.

Respectfully,

ORGANIZATIONS

AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

BOAT PEOPLE SOS

CENTER FOR INQUIRY

COALITION FOR A FREE AND DEMOCRATIC VIETNAM

COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN VIETNAM

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW FOUNDATION

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

UNITED MACEDONIAN DIASPORA

Individuals

Jeff King

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International Christian Concern

Greg Mitchell

President

The Mitchell Firm

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