

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
R O U N D T A B L E

Washington, D.C.

October 1, 2014

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Kerry,

It has been reported that Vietnam's Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh will soon start his official visit of the United States to discuss what has been described as a "comprehensive partnership" with our government. We are writing to urge that you take this opportunity to impress on the Vietnamese government that further expansion of its relationship with the United States is contingent on substantial improvements in human rights practices.

The Vietnamese government continues to hold hundreds of political prisoners and other prisoners of conscience. While a handful of these prisoners were released in recent months, about the same number of new prisoners of conscience have been imprisoned over the same period. Releasing all political prisoners and other prisoners of conscience in the coming months is the best way for the Vietnamese government to demonstrate that it is serious about meeting our expectations on human rights and acts in good faith.

We are particularly concerned about the ongoing campaign against independent religious communities. In late July the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief concluded his 11-day mission to Vietnam with a press statement stating that "serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Viet Nam - in particular, but not only, in rural areas." He asserted that "[u]nder the current situation, [the independent religious communities'] possibilities to operate as independent communities are extremely unsafe and restricted." His observation corroborates our longstanding position that the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and its accompanying Decree 92 impermissibly impose government control over religion and restrict religious activities. These instruments should be repealed or fundamentally revised so that all religious communities may freely practice their respective faiths without government interference.

Equally important is the elimination of laws and decrees that authorize the government to arrest, detain, and/or imprison, among others, dissidents, members of independent religious organizations, labor organizers, bloggers, and journalists. Vietnam's National Assembly, when it convenes this November, should repeal or otherwise eliminate Decree 72 on controlling the use of the Internet, Decree 92 on restricting religious activities, and Penal Code articles such as Article 88 on prohibiting "propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam," Article 258 on "taking advantage of the right to democratic freedoms in order to violate the interests of the State," and Article 79 that prohibits dissidents from organizing themselves to compete politically with the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Finally, Vietnamese workers continue to be denied even the most basic labor rights, including the right to found or join free and independent labor unions. Without the right to form their own labor unions and the right to collective bargaining, Vietnamese workers will continue to face mistreatment, exploitation, and denial of basic benefits. This issue has been brought up time and again by members of Congress, U.S. labor organizations, and international human rights organizations in the context of the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese government seems determined to continue denying these fundamental rights of its citizens and continues to imprison labor organizers.

Our government must reiterate the U.S. position that human rights are the central focus of our relationship with Vietnam, not just one of its many aspects. Human rights should be a cornerstone of any comprehensive partnership that Vietnam hopes to develop with the United States, particularly when it comes to the sale of lethal weapons, the nuclear cooperation agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Thank you for your consideration of these important requests.

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR VIETNAM

ASSOCIATION OF CON DAU PARISHIONERS

AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

BOAT PEOPLE SOS

CAMPAIGN TO ABOLISH TORTURE IN VIETNAM

CENTER FOR INQUIRY

CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE – UNITED KINGDOM

COALITION FOR A FREE AND DEMOCRATIC VIETNAM

COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN VIETNAM

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW FOUNDATION

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

JUBILEE CAMPAIGN

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH OF AMERICA

Individuals

Jeff King
President
International Christian Concern

Greg Mitchell
President
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Roy Speckhardt
Executive Director
American Humanist Association

William C. Walsh
Human Rights Attorney
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