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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY

July 28, 2020

Nguyen Dinh Thang, PhD
Chief Executive Officer & President
Boat People SOS
6066 Leesburg Pike, Suite 100
Falls Church, VA 22041-2220

Dear Dr. Thang,

Thank you for your thoughtful invitation to join Boat People SOS (BPSOS) for a webinar conversation regarding human rights in Vietnam. Unfortunately, I am unable to join you, but I would like to share a bit more about my work to uphold human rights in Vietnam and advocate for the release of Vietnamese prisoners of conscience.

My congressional district contains Little Saigon, a historic area in Orange County, California that constitutes the largest Vietnamese population in the world outside of Vietnam. I have made engaging with the Vietnamese American community in my district a priority, including hosting a roundtable to discuss the most pressing issues facing the community as well as engaging with Ambassador Kritenbrink, United States Ambassador to Vietnam, by meeting with him and participating in a community town hall when he visited Orange County earlier this year.

I am proud to have introduced two bipartisan resolutions that seek to honor the sacrifices of the Montagnard people during the Vietnam War, condemn ongoing human rights violations by the Vietnamese government, and support efforts to preserve Vietnamese and Vietnamese American history and heritage here in the United States. As you know, the Montagnards are composed of several minority ethnic groups who were some of the most loyal allies to United States Armed Forces during the Vietnam War. However, those Montagnards who stayed in Vietnam have been targeted by the Communist government, whose efforts have included the seizure and imprisonment of Montagnard religious leaders. My resolution with Representative Ted Budd ensures that the Montagnards' contributions are recognized and condemns their ongoing persecution within Vietnam.

I have also pushed back on this administration's efforts to repatriate greater numbers of Vietnamese individuals who have lived in the United States for decades. For the past two years, I have led the effort to forbid the use of funds from the State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill from being used to renegotiate the 2008 Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and Vietnam. There are reports this administration would like to renegotiate that agreement to allow for the repatriation of individuals who arrived in the United States prior to the normalization of relations between our two countries, which is forbidden under the current agreement.

This year, I was proud to help secure language in the House Appropriations Committee report which explicitly outlines that no funds are included in the bill to “negotiate or enter into an agreement with the Government of Vietnam for the repatriation of any citizen, former citizen, or national of Vietnam who arrived in the United States before July 12, 1995.” This language aims to keep families and communities intact and makes clear that Congress does not support broadening the criteria for repatriation to Vietnam.

Detaining individuals for their religious affiliation or advocacy for religious freedom must not be tolerated in Vietnam or elsewhere. That is why I joined with former United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Commissioner Anurima Bhargava to “adopt” a prisoner of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s Defending Freedoms Project. Nguyen Bac Truyen is a Hòa Hảo Buddhist and legal expert who founded the Vietnamese Political and Religious Prisoners Friendship Association, a group devoted to assisting prisoners of conscience and their families. He was arrested and detained in July 2017, and has since been denied access to legal counsel, visits from family, and food and medicine deliveries. The Vietnamese government has also forbidden Mr. Truyen’s wife from leaving Vietnam to travel internationally and advocate for her husband’s release.

Commissioner Bhargava and I published an op-ed in The Hill on April 24, 2020, calling for Mr. Truyen’s release and condemning the ongoing abuse of human rights and personal freedoms in Vietnam. We also called upon the State Department to designate Vietnam a “Country of Particular Concern” and to provide funding for programs in Vietnam that educate local officials about the importance of religious freedom. Rest assured, I will continue to advocate for the release of all Vietnamese prisoners of conscience and ensure internationally recognized human rights are upheld in Vietnam.

I regret that I cannot join you for your upcoming events, but I appreciate the opportunity to highlight some of my work on issues related to human rights and prisoners of conscience in Vietnam. I look forward to working with you to achieve real progress on these issues.

Sincerely,



Harley Rouda
Member of Congress