

August 28, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary
Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are writing to recommend that the Department of State apply sanctions in response to the egregious violations of religious freedom in Vietnam, which in most ways are getting progressively worse.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that Vietnam be designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) “for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).” In a letter dated July 30 to you, Senators John Cornyn and Marco Rubio urged, in addition to CPC designation, that the Department of State impose Global Magnitsky Act sanctions against certain individuals who have committed grave human rights violations. We fully support these recommendations.

While reportedly there have been a few scattered improvements in recent years, the bigger picture is that the already grim situation has worsened. An increasing number of victims who reported human rights violations to UN mandate holders have been subjected to punishment, including being placed under travel ban, detained, beaten, tortured, or vilified in public. Two long-time followers of the Cao Dai Religion, following their meetings with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, have been purportedly excommunicated from their religion by a canonically illegitimate Cao Dai organization that was established by order of the Vietnamese Communist Party. A witness to the beatings of some 30 Catholic women by an organized mob known as Red Flag Association was issued an arrest warrant and the priest who reported the mob received death threats. On the other hand, the victims’ repeated petitions to the police asking for an investigation of the perpetrators have been ignored by the police.

In June, the Political Officer and Political Affairs Advisor at the U.S. Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) met with over twenty Montagnard Christians during a visit to Gia Lai Province and Dak Lak Province. All those who met with these U.S. officers have been subsequently taken to the police station for questioning. They were ordered to abandon their faith and stop reporting human rights violations. The police threatened them with beating, detention, imprisonment and, at least in one case, death.

Silencing those who reported human rights violations severely hampers any efforts by the international community to assess Vietnam’s compliance with its professed commitments to international human rights standards. In their April 30 communication, two UN Special Rapporteurs expressed grave concern to the Vietnamese Government: *“These allegations, if correct, would not only contravene Vietnam’s international human rights obligations under the ICCPR, in the sense that they impinge upon internationally-recognized rights of Vietnamese nationals, but they also appear to illustrate a pattern of reprisals against*

persons who sought to engage and cooperate with United Nations human rights mechanisms or foreign diplomatic representatives.” (Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 30 April 2020, Reference # AL VNM 2/2020)

The U.S. government has applied targeted sanctions against over 200 individuals and entities in 25 countries, but none in Vietnam. This may send the wrong message as Vietnam may come to believe—mistakenly—that its own poor human rights record might be overlooked by the U.S. Government due to geopolitical and economic interests. Applying targeted sanctions against Vietnamese officials would dispel this impression of immunity and be an effective way for the United States both to draw a clear line for religious freedom while encouraging Vietnam to be a more responsible and reliable partner in a future strategic relationship with the United States.

We therefore further call on your good office to apply targeted sanctions under IRFA to government officials responsible for acts of severe persecution against people of faith in the following provinces:

Dak Lak Province: Government officials who are responsible for forced renunciation of faith through harassment, multiple interrogations, torture, imprisonment, denial of medical care, and intimidation of Christians, including many Montagnards (ethnic minorities living in the Central Highlands and other remote, primarily mountainous regions). Since 2013, we have documented 177 incidents of forced renunciation of faith, 8 incidents of torture, 5 incidents of imprisonment, and 2 deaths by torture, all because of the victims’ religious belief and/or practice.

Gia Lai Province: Government officials who are responsible for forced renunciation of faith through harassment, multiple interrogations, torture, imprisonment, denial of medical care, and intimidation of Christians, including many Montagnards. Since 2013, we have documented 49 incidents of forced renunciation of faith, 16 incidents of torture, 20 incidents of imprisonment, 15 incidents of beating, and 2 deaths by torture, all because of the victims’ religious belief and/or practice.

Kontum Province: Government officials who are responsible for forced renunciation of faith through harassment, multiple interrogations, torture, imprisonment, denial of medical care, and intimidation of Christians, including many Montagnards; and for demolishing a Buddhist pagoda, denying personal documents to its abbot and threatening his followers. Since 2013, we have documented 29 incidents of forced renunciation of faith, 3 incidents of imprisonment, and 1 incident of demolition of house of worship. By 2018, practically all house churches of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ had been forced to cease operations.

Phu Yen Province: Government officials who are responsible for the elimination of an entire religion (An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist Sect) and the arrest, torture and imprisonment of 25 of its leaders and key followers – they are included in USCIRF’s victims list; the confiscation of religious and other property of the An Dan Dai Dao Sect and assets of four sect members who are U.S. citizens; repeated attempts to seize an independent Cao Dai temple serving its congregation in order to transfer it to a government-created sect; ordering followers of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ to renounce their faith and threatening them with torture and imprisonment for non-compliance.

Nghe An Province: Government officials who are responsible for the persecution and imprisonment of Catholics calling for environmental justice after the ecological disaster of 2016; use of organized mobs known as Red Flag Associations to intimidate and incite hate speech against entire Catholic parishes and their priests; retaliation against victims and witnesses who denounced the Red Flag Associations and the government officials directing them; travel bans against priests and parishioners who advocated for environmental justice; and forcing Hmong Christians and Vietnamese Catholics to renounce their faith and threatening or punishing those who resisted.

Targeted sanctions are designed to change behavior. Sanctioning responsible Vietnamese government officials for their serious violations of religious freedom would work to prevent Vietnam from maintaining the status quo or moving in a worse direction. We therefore urge the Department of State to apply targeted sanctions under IRFA and other relevant statutes against the identified perpetrators.

Detailed information of identified perpetrators has been submitted to the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the International Religious Freedom Office at the Department of State. We respectfully request that you take that information into account in determining the appropriate sanctions to apply against individual government officials responsible for egregious violations of religious freedom in Vietnam.

Respectfully,

Nguyen Dinh Thang, PhD
CEO & President
Boat People SOS

ORGANIZATIONS

1. Alliance Defending Freedom International
2. Association for the Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Vietnam
3. Buddhist Solidarity Association
4. Build Human Rights for Montagnards
5. Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam
6. Campaign for Uyghurs
7. China Aid Association
8. Christian Freedom International
9. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)
10. Citizen Power Initiatives for China
11. Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
12. Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia (CAMSA)
13. Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam
14. Con Dau Parishioners Association Human Rights First
15. Global Alliance Against Communist Propaganda and Disinformation
16. Global Women Christian Chamber of Commerce Embassy Ministerial Alliance Sphere
17. Hoa Hao Buddhist Congregation – Central Overseas Executive Committee
18. Healing for the Nations
19. Human Rights First
20. Freedom Now

21. Freedom2Care
22. Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam
23. International Center on Religion and Justice
24. International Christian Concern
25. Jubilee Campaign
26. Junior Sacerdotal Council of Cao Dai Religion
27. Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice
28. Minh Van Foundation
29. Montagnards Stand for Justice
30. Red Eagle Enterprises
31. The Alliance for Enlightened Judaism
32. The International Multi-Faith Coalition
33. Vietnam Coalition Against Torture
34. Vietnam Human Rights Network
35. Vietnamese Women for Human Rights

INDIVIDUALS

1. Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett
President, Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice
Former Chair, US Commission on International Religious Freedom
2. Kristina Arriaga
Former Vice Chair, US Commission on International Religious Freedom
CEO, Intrinsic
3. Rev. Andrew Dzung Nguyen
Priest of Benedictine Order, New Mexico
Currently at Thien An Monastery, Vietnam
4. Duong Xuan Luong
Former religious prisoner of conscience in Vietnam
Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas
5. Pastor A Ga, Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ
Former victim of religious persecution in Vietnam
Raleigh, North Carolina
6. Illong Ju, Christian
Former victim of religious persecution in North Korea
7. Hoang Van Pa, Hmong Christian
Former Victim of religious persecution in Vietnam
8. Ksor Sun – Montagnard Christian
Former religious prisoner of conscience in Vietnam
9. Truong Minh Tam, Jurist
Human rights advocate, refugee from Vietnam
10. Surry P. Roberts M.D.
Advocate for Montagnards
Raleigh, North Carolina
11. Nguyen Van Chinh
Monk of the Benedictine Order
Fresno, California