

September 28, 2020

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

Religious freedom and human rights advocates call for the immediate and unconditional release of Mr. Nguyễn Bắc Truyển

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are writing to call on the Department of State to press for the release of religious prisoner of conscience Nguyễn Bắc Truyển as part of the upcoming US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue. He is arguably the highest-profile religious prisoner of conscience in Vietnam. He has been adopted by the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) under its religious freedom project and by Representatives Zoe Lofgren and Harley Rouda under the Defending Freedom Project of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Up until his abduction by the police, he served as the original coordinator of the Vietnam Freedom of Religion or Belief Roundtable.

Mr. Nguyễn Bắc Truyển was abducted on July 30, 2017 by the Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) authorities and secretly transferred to Hanoi. After six months held incommunicado, he was tried on the charge of "acting to overthrow the people's government" under Article 79 of the Vietnamese Penal Code (VPC) and sentenced to eleven years in prison and then to three years of house arrest following the prison term. He is now held at Prison Camp An Đầm, about 1000 kilometers away from his wife and family.

Nguyễn Bắc Truyển, born in 1968, is a Hoa Hao Buddhist. He was arrested for the first time in 2006 and sentenced to three and a half years followed by two years of house arrest on the charge of "propaganda against the state" under Article 88 of Vietnam's Penal Code. After his release, in 2010 he joined the Vietnamese Political and Religious Prisoners Friendship Association, an organization that assists impecunious prisoners and their families. As a jurist, he provided pro-bono legal assistance to families of political prisoners, victims of land grabbing, and persecuted religious communities. From 2014 until his most recent abduction, he cooperated with the Redemptorist Order's Justice and Peace Office as coordinator of its assistance program for disabled veterans of South Vietnam.

Nguyễn Bắc Truyển is deeply committed to the right to freedom of religion or belief. He worked to build capacity for religious communities in Vietnam so that they can fully exercise their basic rights. His inter-religious activities also aimed at strengthening the dialogue and cooperation between various religions. Until his arrest in 2017, Nguyễn Bắc Truyển coordinated the Vietnam Freedom of Religion or Belief Roundtable, a network of religious freedom advocates and members of persecuted religious and indigenous communities. He was also co-founder of Vietnam Coalition Against Torture and contributed many submissions to the UN Committee Against Torture.

Nguyễn Bắc Truyển meticulously collected evidence and interviewed victims for the compilation of submissions to the different UN mandate holders. He and his wife provided valuable assistance to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief during the Special Rapporteur's July 2014 visit in Vietnam. His imprisonment has all the earmarks of an act of reprisal by the government for his human rights work. In his September 2019 Intimidation and

Reprisals Reports, the UN Secretary General also considered the government's travel ban imposed on Mr. Truỳễn's wife, Ms. Bui Thi Kim Phuong, to be an act of reprisal. In March 2019 she was prevented from travelling from Vietnam to Geneva, Germany, and the United States to advocate for the release of her husband.

In the latest Intimidation and Reprisal Report, released on September 15, 2020, the UN Secretary-General expressed concern regarding Nguyễn Bắc Truỳễn's frail health and the lack of proper medical care in prison: "Since his arrest in July 2017, Mr. Nguyen Bac Truyen has reportedly not had a proper medical examination, faces restrictions of food and medical supplies, and his health condition has deteriorated. A petition on 18 January 2020 to the Board of Supervisors at An Diem prison requesting a medical check reportedly remains unanswered."

Vietnam is a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The detention of Mr. Nguyễn Bắc Truỳễn is a violation of several of its articles, including Article 18 (right to freedom of religion or belief), Article 7 (freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment), Article 9 (right to liberty and security of the person and freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention), and Article 14 (right to equality before the law; the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty and to have a fair and public hearing by an impartial tribunal established by law).

On August 13 of this year, 65 current and former parliamentarians from 28 countries sent a joint letter to Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, calling for Nguyễn Bắc Truỳễn's immediate and unconditional release. In the spirit of solidarity with our colleagues at the Vietnam Freedom of Religion or Belief Roundtable, we ask that the United States consider his freedom a key benchmark of human rights improvement at the upcoming human rights dialogue with Vietnam.

Sincerely,

Nguyen Dinh Thang, PhD
CEO & President
Boat People SOS

Enclosure: IPP/FORB joint letter to Vietnam's Prime Minister

ORGANIZATIONS

1. Association for the Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief-Vietnam (AAFoRB-VN)
2. Boat People SOS
3. Buddhist Solidarity Association
4. Campaign for Uyghurs
5. Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam
6. China Aid Association
7. Christian Freedom International
8. Con Dau Catholic Parishioners Association
9. CSW
10. Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
11. Citizen Power Initiatives for China

12. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
13. Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia (CAMSA)
14. Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam
15. Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience
16. Counterparts – Vietnam Veterans Association
17. Faith & Liberty DC
18. Global Women Christian Chamber of Commerce Embassy Ministerial Alliance Sphere
19. Hoa Hao Buddhist Congregation (Central Overseas Executive Committee)
20. Hmong United for Justice
21. Human Rights First
22. Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam
23. Institute on Religion and Democracy
24. International Christian Concern
25. Junior Sacerdotal Council of the Cao Dai Religion
26. Jubilee Campaign USA
27. Law and Liberty International
28. Minh Van Foundation
29. Montagnards Stand for Justice
30. PGHH Buddhist Center, San Jose, California
31. Red Eagle Enterprises
32. Save the Persecuted Christians
33. Stefanus Alliance International
34. Stichting Vietnam Human Rights Foundation
35. The Alliance for Enlightened Judaism
36. Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union
37. Vietnam Coalition Against Torture
38. Vietnamese American Community in San Antonio, Texas
39. Vietnamese Women for Human Rights
40. 21Wilberforce

INDIVIDUALS

1. Bui Kim Phuong, wife of Nguyen Bac Truyen
Vietnam
2. The Most Venerable Thích Thiện Minh
26-year religious prisoner of conscience
Member of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Vietnam
3. Pastor A Ga, Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ
Former victim of religious persecution in Vietnam
Raleigh, North Carolina
4. Matias Perttula
Director of Advocacy, International Christian Concern
5. Dr. Jianli Yang
President, Citizen Power Initiatives for China
6. Professor Thomas Kellenberg
International Human Rights Advocate
Washington, D.C.
7. Michelle Nguyen
Coordinator, Vietnam Coalition Against Torture

8. Markus Eban
Member, Montagnards Stand for Justice, Thailand
9. Y Pher Hdrue
Former religious prisoner of conscience, Vietnam
10. Rcom Ayul
Build Human Rights for Montagnards
11. Paul Nguyen
Catholic human rights advocate, Houston, Texas
12. Dr. Grant A. McClure
Commander, Counterparts – Vietnam Veterans Association
13. Michael Bengé
Former POW, Counterparts – Vietnam Veterans Association
14. Hong Thi Tran
Survivor of Torture from Vietnam, Raleigh, North Carolina
15. Khanh Tran
Chief Operating Officer, BPSOS
Falls Church, Virginia
16. Thien Nguyen
Coordinator, Buddhist Solidary Association
17. Tien Nguyen
Human Rights Defender
Falls Church, Virginia
18. Van Ngo
Human Rights Defender
Silver Spring, Maryland
19. Binh Luong
Manassas, Virginia
20. Thien Tran
Missouri, Texas
21. Dr. Trong Phan
Television Commentator, Irving, TX
22. Loc Thanh Nguyen
London, UK
23. Bi V. Nguyen
Palm Harbor, Florida
24. Dr. Nguyen Dinh Thang
Laureate of 2011 Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award
25. Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt
Professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Policy, University of Erlangen-
Nuremberg, Germany
Former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
26. Tran Thi Nga
Former Prisoner of Conscience, Royston, Georgia
27. Vũ Hoàng Nguyễn
Tra Vinh, Vietnam
28. Rev. Viet Nguyen
Parish Priest, Tampa, FL
29. Jeff Chen
Participant of IRF Roundtable, Rockville, Maryland

30. Loan Vo

Member of Buddhist Solidarity Association, Seattle, Washington