

September 5, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are writing to request that you, on the occasion of your upcoming state visit to Vietnam, directly raise concerns with the Vietnamese leadership about their government's antagonistic policies toward religions that do not submit to government control. In particular, we respectfully urge you to secure the immediate release of prisoners of conscience including Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyen Bac Truyen, Pastor Y Yich, and Evangelist Y Pum Bya who have all been recognized as religious prisoners of conscience by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and adopted by the Lantos Human Rights Commission.

Over the past twelve months, we have observed the rapid escalation of repressive measures against religious groups that resist government control. Of particular concern are the government's intensifying efforts to force Montagnard and Hmong Christians to renounce their faith, crack down on house churches that do not submit themselves to government control, and coerce members of independent religious groups to join government-controlled religious organizations. In the last two months alone, a dozen Montagnard house churches were abolished and hundreds of their members forced to join the government-backed Evangelical Church of Vietnam – South.

Those who resisted forced conversion and/or renunciation of faith are dealt with harshly. On April 8, the police of Dak Lak Province arrested Montagnard Evangelist Y Krech Bya, a member of the Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands, as he was hosting an Easter vigil service at his home. He was criminally charged with "sabotaging the national unity policy" under Article 116 of Vietnam's Penal Code, which may carry a sentence of up to 15 years in prison. The government has outlawed his church and ordered him to join the government-sanctioned Evangelical Church of Vietnam – South. Due to his resistance, over the years he has often been taken to the police station for interrogation and at times has been publicly denounced by local government officials at town meetings. In 2004 he was sentenced to eight years of prison for joining peaceful demonstrations to advocate for religious freedom for the Montagnard people. On April 8, eight other

members of his church were also temporarily detained for interrogation. On that same day the police of Dak Lak Province announced the criminal prosecution in absentia of Pastor A Ga, a resident of Raleigh, North Carolina, founder of the Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands, and an internationally known defender of religious freedom

Vietnam's policy of forcing independent Evangelical Christians to abandon their faith extends to members of the Hmong ethnic minority. Earlier this month, two Hmong sisters had to flee to Thailand by land with, respectively, their one-year and four-month old children. They converted to Christianity in 2018 and concealed their new faith against family members and the local authorities. Recently the authorities found out, ordered them to return to the Hmong traditional animism, and, as they resisted, banished them from their village, threatening them with imprisonment or death. Her older sister had to similarly flee to Thailand last year, leaving behind her two young children.

This policy of forced abandonment of faith has even been enforced against American citizens. In August of last year Mr. Khue Vang, a naturalized U.S. citizen of Hmong ethnicity and a resident of Wisconsin, was visiting his wife and their four children, aged 6 to 13 years old, in Nghe An Province, Vietnam. During a house inspection, the local police found out that he was a Christian; they expelled him from the district. After Mr. Vang returned to the United States, the police tried to force his wife, Mrs. Lỳ Y Xò, to also renounce her Christian faith. When she refused, the police confiscated her personal documents and the birth certificates of her children and threatened her with imprisonment. She and her children fled to Dak Lak Province. Without the required personal documents, they cannot register to stay legally in the new location, not even temporarily. Mrs. Xò, who earned a livelihood through farming, has no farmland to work on and cannot find legal employment anywhere. Her children cannot go to school and do not have access to basic social services or benefits. Undocumented in their own country, their circumstances are dire and precarious.

Members of the persecuted Cao Dai Church who opposed the occupation of their Church's facilities by the government-created Cao Dai Sect have been repeatedly punished with travel bans. On April 1, the border control police issued a belated travel ban notice to three Cao Dai dignitaries as they were returning to Vietnam from Cambodia. The Foreign Travel Management Bureau had been late in notifying the border control police about the travel bans directed at Mr. Lê Văn Một, Mr. Trần Quốc Tiến, and Ms. Lương Thi Nở. A fourth Caodai believer, Ms. Nguyễn Hồng Phượng, was stopped at the crossing point on her way to Cambodia because her travel ban notice had reached the border control police in time. In mid-

March a Cao Dai dignitary, Ms. Nguyễn Xuân Mai, was notified of a Decision to Fine for “administrative violations,” because she had posted a video of the police disrupting religious activities conducted at the home of one of her relatives.

Although the government officially tolerates and regulates the Catholic Church, it has always persecuted Catholic priests and believers whom it regards as insufficiently enthusiastic about government control. On March 22, government authorities of Ngọc Hồi District, Kon Tum Province, intruded and abruptly stopped Father Lê Tiên from celebrating Mass at a local chapel of Saint Paul Parish. They cut off the lights, and one of them took away the Bible from which Father Tiên was reading. They dispersed all the churchgoers and ordered Father Tiên to report to the police station for questioning. This is the third incident within the last year in which local authorities have disrupted the celebration of Mass at Saint Paul Mission. The mission was established in 2017 but is still not recognized by the local government. The parish built a wooden chapel, which local government personnel have threatened to tear down several times, and the police have regularly prevented priests and parishioners from celebrating Mass.

In 2019 the Kon Tum Province authorities completely razed Son Linh Pagoda, which belonged to the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam – which had been the largest religious organization in Vietnam before it was outlawed by the Communist regime, which directed Buddhists to join a substitute organization established and controlled by the government. The pagoda’s abbot then had to live in an unsafe warehouse. In 2021, Ven. Thích Nhật Phước became the new abbot. He made multiple requests for permission to shore up the unsafe warehouse but did not receive any response. So, in December 2021 he went ahead to bolster it with aluminum corrugated sheets. On December 13, 2022, the government demolished his dwelling. The abbot now must live in a makeshift shack near the latrine, which is all that remains of Son Linh Pagoda. On March 22, 2023, Ven. Thích Thiên Thuận, the Monk Superior of Ven. Thích Nhật Phước, was ordered by the government of Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu Province to demolish many structures at his own pagoda. He was given a deadline of August 30, 2023, after which the government would send in its demolition team to carry out the order and will charge Ven. Thích Thiên Thuận 990,501,451 VND, equivalent to 42,200 USD.

As a final example of the intensifying persecution of independent religious organizations and churches, on March 13, 2023, over a hundred police officers conducted yet another raid on the facility of a Buddhist religious group known as Thiền Am Bên Bờ Vũ Trụ (“Zen Hermitage on the Edge of the Universe”). They took aside four nuns for interrogation, causing fear among all the group’s members

who were mostly women and children. In July 2022, the group's 90-years old founder and five young monks in training were tried for violations of Article 331 of the Penal Code ("Abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State, lawful rights, and interests of organizations and/or citizens").

They were sentenced to a total of 23.5 years in prison. The public security police recently initiated criminal prosecution against three lawyers who defended this Buddhist group, also under Article 331. In June, all three fled to the United States to seek asylum.

It is particularly disturbing that the arrest of Evangelist Y Krech Bya and the announced prosecution of Pastor A Ga, a U.S. legal permanent resident, followed on the heels of your call to Vietnam Communist Party's General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng on March 29. This high-level call may reinforce the Vietnamese leadership's belief that it can violate human rights and persecute faith communities without affecting its relationship with the United States.

We therefore urge you to tell the Vietnamese leaders in no uncertain terms that further engagement between the two countries must be based on dramatic improvements in the Vietnamese government's dismal record on human rights and respect for religious freedom. In particular, the Vietnamese government should:

(1) Instruct authorities at all local, district, and provincial levels to immediately stop their practice of forced renunciation of faith and respect the right of Christian house church believers to conduct their religious activities independently from government-sanctioned religious organizations;

(2) Repeal or substantially amend the problematic Articles 116 ("sabotaging the national unity policy") and 331 ("abusing democratic freedoms") of its Penal Code to comply with UN human rights conventions;

(3) Immediately and unconditionally release Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyễn Bắc Truyền, Montagnard Pastor Y Yich, Montagnard Evangelist Y Pum Bya, Montagnard Christian Y Krech Bya, all members of Thiên Am Bên Bờ Vũ Trụ Buddhist Sect Group (Lê Thanh Hoàn Nguyễn, Lê Thanh Trùng Dương, Lê Thanh Nhất Nguyễn, Cao Thi Cúc, Lê Thanh Nhị Nguyễn), and some 80 other religious prisoners; and

(4) Cease all acts of transnational repression targeting human rights defenders among the Vietnamese diaspora.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests and for your Administration's attention to these important matters.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nguyen Thang", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Nguyen Dinh Thang, PhD  
CEO & President, Boat People SOS (BPSOS)

Cc: The Honorable Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State

The Honorable Rashad Hussain, Ambassador at Large for International  
Religious Freedom

The Honorable Daniel Kritenbrink, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and  
Pacific Affairs

The Honorable Marc Knapper, United States Ambassador to the Socialist  
Republic of Vietnam

## **Organizations:**

1. 21 Wilberforce, USA
2. Association for Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Vietnam, USA
3. Buddhist Solidarity Association, USA
4. Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam, USA
5. Cao Dai Today, USA
6. CSW, United Kingdom
7. Jubilee Campaign, United Kingdom
8. Montagnard Stand For Justice (MSFJ), Thailand
9. One Bread, USA
10. Vietnam Coalition Against Torture (VN-CAT), USA
11. Vietnamese Women for Human Rights, USA

## **Individuals:**

1. A Ga, Pastor  
Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands, North Carolina, USA
2. Chris Nguyen  
One Bread, USA
3. Dr. Katrina Lantos-Swett, President  
Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice, USA
4. Gia Vang  
Hmong Human Rights Coalition, Thailand
5. H Biap Krong  
PSPF Foundation, Thailand
6. Liem Ly  
Advocates for Faith and Justice in Vietnam (AFJV), USA
7. Loan Vo, Coordinator  
Buddhist Solidarity Association
8. Lu A Da  
Hmong Human Rights Coalition, Thailand
9. Michelle Nguyen, Advocacy Coordinator  
Vietnam Coalition Against Torture (VN-CAT), USA
10. Minh Do  
Advocates for Faith and Justice in Vietnam (AFJV)
11. Minh Luong Nguyen, Member  
Buddhist Solidarity Association
12. Omer Kanat, Executive Director  
Uyghur Human Rights Project
13. Quan Bui, President  
Cao Dai temple in Mountain View, Dallas, Texas, USA
14. Rob Schrader, Pastor  
USA
15. Sam Brownback, Ambassador  
Former Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, USA

16. Soraya M. Deen, Lawyer  
Religious Freedom or Belief advocate
17. Tanya Nguyen-Do, representative  
Thien Am Ben Bo Vu Tru Buddhist Sect Group, USA
18. Thao-Nhi Bui  
National Organization for Vietnamese American Leadership-Texas, USA
19. Thuy Nguyen  
Committee to Unite Cao Dai Disciples
20. Tien Nguyen, President  
Clarity & Decency
21. Trong Phan  
USA
22. Y Nuen Ayun, Pastor  
Evangelical Church of Christ of the Central Highlands, Vietnam
23. Y Phic Hdok, representative in the USA  
Montagnard Stand For Justice (MSFJ), USA
24. Y Quynh Buon Dap, representative in Thailand  
Montagnard Stand For Justice (MSFJ), Thailand