

January 8, 2015

The Honorable Ed Royce
Chairman, House Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chairman Royce:

Thank you for notifying us of the upcoming interactive policy discussion with USAID Administrator Dr. Rajiv Shah at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. That would be a good opportunity to raise issues about oversight and monitoring of USAID-funded services to people with disability in Vietnam. The total funding allocated to Vietnam so far must have been in excess of 50 million US dollars.

According to our estimate, there are at least one hundred thousand disabled veterans of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). These former US allies are victims of severe discrimination and, with few exceptions, have been denied access to disability services, including those funded by the US government via USAID.

To address this situation, hundreds of US-based groups/organizations, including many in your district, have for the past two decades discreetly offered financial assistance to about 30,000 of these disabled veterans. Practically none of them, despite their eligibility, has received assistance from Vietnamese service providers that are funded with US tax dollars. Worse yet, many of these disabled veterans are threatened and harassed for having received assistance from US-based organizations; some local authorities reportedly even took away a portion or all of the assistance they received.

There are a number of religious organizations in Vietnam that have in small ways tried to help the South Vietnamese disabled veterans, at the risk of government retaliation. Lien Tri Buddhist Temple has for decades offered, once a year, free meals and small gifts for a few hundred disabled veterans. Its abbot, The Most Ven. Thich Khong Tanh, has been harassed by the government for this and other charitable activities. The temple is under threat of being razed for a government development project. More recently the Redemptorist Order in Saigon started to offer financial and some medical assistance to disabled veterans of the Republic of Vietnam. This Catholic order too is being targeted by the police.

Another disability community consists of victims of torture. Many of them have been rendered physically and mentally disabled. Torture survivors need rehabilitation and psychological health services but do not have access to needed services, including those funded with U.S. tax dollars.

Finally, the Catholic Church operates a number of leprosy camps in Central Highlands and in Vinh Diocese. They serve tens of thousands of patients on shoe-string budgets. Their good work remains unnoticed by most in the country and the outside world. They are not invited to any table that discusses disability rights or available funding.

To rectify the problems as described above and to further the rights of people with disability, we need to empower and equip organizations such as Lien Tri Buddhist Temple in Binh Duong, the Redemptorist Order in Saigon, Catholic organizations that run leprosy camps... We also need to give voice to the disability communities and make them the ultimate evaluators of the effectiveness of U.S.-funded programs. To that effect, we would like to recommend the following steps:

(1) The U.S. embassy in Ha Noi should refer cases provided by U.S.-based groups to those Vietnamese service providers that receive U.S. funding. Perhaps we should start with a small sample of cases to test the system in Vietnam and see how they would be handled and served.

(2) USAID in coordination with the U.S. embassy in Ha Noi should invite independent organizations such as the Redemptorist Order and Lien Tri Buddhist Temple to share lessons learned and best practices relating to serving disability communities with their government-sanctioned counterparts.

(3) USAID in coordination with the U.S. embassy in Ha Noi should facilitate evaluation/appraisal/feedback of US-funded service providers by focus groups whose members are selected from diverse disability communities, including disabled veterans of the Republic of Vietnam, victims of torture and people with Hansen's disease, among others. Evaluation by clients or prospective clients is the only true evaluation and conforms to U.S. accountability requirement.

We need to ensure that Vietnamese government agencies and service providers that receive U.S. funding will fully comply with fundamental principles of transparency, non-discrimination and accountability as imposed by U.S. laws. Last September we had a discussion on exactly the same concerns with the Special Advisor for International Disability Rights in the Office of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the U.S. Department of State. They said that they would convey to USAID our concerns and proposed remedial steps.

We look to your leadership to ensure that U.S. funding for disability services in Vietnam is well and properly managed, and eligible individuals are served without discrimination. We are open to meet with Dr. Shah or his designee in Washington DC to further discuss the above issues of concern to Vietnamese American taxpayers.

Sincerely,



Nguyen Dinh Thang, PhD
CEO & President