

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING
VIETNAM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Frederick A. Davie, Vice Chair

David Curry

Susie Gelman

Stephen Schneck

Eric Ueland

Frank Wolf

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P R O C E E D I N G S

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Good morning and welcome to our hearing on challenges and opportunities for better religious freedom in Vietnam.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the United States government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

Since 2002, USCIRF has recommended that the United States Department of State designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for engaging in egregious, ongoing, and systematic

violations of religious freedom.

Our reporting has attempted to provide some nuance in reflecting how Vietnam continues to engage in such violations and yet has made some clear progress toward improvement, particularly over the last decade.

More recent developments, unfortunately, have threatened to reverse this progress, which is why USCIRF welcomed the Department of State's 2022 placement of Vietnam on its Special Watch List.

The United States and Vietnam have taken great strides in repairing relations and building a deepening partnership, such as finding ways to partner together in multilateral fora such as the Human Rights Council.

Our economic and geostrategic interests in preserving and furthering an international rules-based order ensure this trajectory of deeper partnership.

However, one clear barrier to ever-deepening ties remains: Vietnam's recent backsliding in regard to meeting its obligations to

international human rights standards.

I recently had the privilege of leading a USCIRF delegation to Vietnam, alongside my colleague Commissioner Eric Ueland, where we visited with government officials and representatives of various unregistered, registered, and recognized religious communities.

The government officials with whom we met were gracious hosts and were clear in characterizing the diversity of religious communities as a national asset, a point with which we wholeheartedly agreed.

However, our assessment of religious freedom conditions within the country differed significantly from theirs.

As consistently emphasized during our meetings, chief among our concerns is the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion. This 2018 Law on Belief and Religion was a milestone when it was first released, improving standards over previous laws and regulations, but unfortunately it still falls short of meeting international standards of human

rights and Vietnam's obligation to such standards, to which it has voluntarily signed.

This law outlines how a religious group can officially register and ultimately become a recognized religion in Vietnam.

But this law confuses the international standards of registration for organizations as compulsory for the organizations to exist. In fact, the international standards clearly indicate that such registration must be optional and mainly applicable for a religious organization to gain a legal personality.

When we spoke with religious communities during our trip, regardless of their registration or recognition status spectrum, all groups shared a persistent concern that the burdensome registration process has often led to official intervention into two core components of their activities: choosing religious leadership and interpreting scripture.

Such intervention represents a violation of international standards of religious freedom.

All religious organizations shared with us

their desire to contribute to the local community and to the social and economic development of Vietnam in general.

They wish simply to practice their faith freely and for ethnic minorities in their native language and to pass their religious traditions to their children.

For Vietnam to continue to develop into a mature economy and to secure greater stability, the government must recognize the rights of these religious communities.

With that, I would like to now turn to my colleague and travel partner to Vietnam, Commissioner Eric Ueland. Commissioner Ueland.

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice Chairman.

In recent decades, as Vice Chairman Davie mentioned, Vietnam has indeed made progress on multiple fronts, both domestic and international.

Throughout our time in Vietnam, we marveled at the economic development we observed. Vietnam is a growing and vibrant country with a

rich, millennia-long history. But this progress and the stability it has brought is now under threat from Vietnam's recent religious freedom regression, such as we highlighted in our 2023 Annual Report.

USCIRF is especially concerned about the conditions for people of faith who Vietnamese authorities have detained and otherwise imprisoned for their religious beliefs or for their advocacy for these rights.

These prisoners include many among our online database, called the Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List.

It was our unfortunate observation when listening to the testimony of family members, fellow believers, and other activists that the government of Vietnam uses its legal system to enforce a rule by law, not a rule of law, particularly when it comes to religious freedom.

In addition to the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion, as Vice Chairman Davie mentioned, also the Criminal Code is a potent weapon for

controlling and intimidating religious communities.

Articles like 331 under this code, which vaguely criminalizes the, quote, "abuse" of basic freedoms, such as speech, press, religion, and association, are especially used against ethnic and religious minorities.

Such groups include many in the Central and Northern Highlands, such as Montagnard and Hmong Christians, but also Khmer Krom Buddhists and others in the country's South, who have experienced the government's abuse of laws and regulations to impede their ability to organize and practice their beliefs.

In fact, the authorities recently detained several Khmer Krom Buddhists, including two we actually met with in Ho Chi Minh City, Thach Cuong and To Hoang Chuong, on suspicion of violating Article 331 for advocating for the rights of their ethnic and religious community.

In addition to these recent detentions, we continue to express concern for other prisoners, such as Hoa Hao Buddhist Nguyen Bac Truyen, and

Montagnard Protestant Y Wo Nie, among others.

Today's hearing will provide an opportunity for a variety of communities and experts to share about the current state of religious freedom in Vietnam.

It will also examine how Vietnam's current legal system is falling short of their international obligations and how the U.S. government as a growing partner and friend can encourage the Vietnamese authorities to effectively reform that legal system to better preserve religious freedom, promote stability and demonstrate the true worth of this partnership with the United States.

We've asked our witnesses, among other items, to explore concrete steps that the U.S. government can take to encourage the Vietnamese government to reverse its recent shift and to secure greater religious freedom for all people in their country.

In fact, when President Biden travels to Vietnam to sign the strategic partnership agreement

this Sunday, USCIRF calls on him to clearly and boldly include religious freedom in these conversations.

We believe this basic right cannot be ignored for any sustainable relationship to proceed between the United States and Vietnam or, for that matter, any other country.

I look forward to the witnesses this morning and thank them very much for participating.

I'll now turn the proceedings back over to Vice Chairman Davie, and thanks a lot, Fred. Appreciate it.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Sure. Thank you, Commissioner Ueland. Thank you, Eric. Much appreciate your comments.

And we will now turn to Congressman Zoe Lofgren of California, who has provided recorded remarks.

Congressman Lofgren.

MS. LOFGREN: [Pre-recorded remarks.]

I'm Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren, California's 18th District, and, as you may know,

I'm the co-chair of the Congressional Vietnam Caucus, alongside my colleagues Chris Smith, Lou Correa, and Michelle Steel.

You know the city of San Jose, which I represent, has the largest Vietnamese American population of any city outside of Vietnam.

I hear concerning stories about Vietnam's human rights violations from community members frequently, and because I represent and have represented this community for so long, I personally know and am friends with people who have experienced the torture and the humiliation and the abuse that the Communist government delivers to its people.

Unfortunately, the Vietnamese Communist government just continues to deny fundamental freedoms, including religious freedoms, to its citizens.

So to everyone participating in this hearing, please know this: my colleagues and I will not stop fighting for human rights. We know from the continued reports that the government in Hanoi

does not respect religious freedom.

We have again reintroduced our bipartisan Vietnam Human Rights Act, and we did it this May. The bill would hold Vietnamese officials accountable for gross human rights abuses and help prioritize the protection of freedoms and the development of the rule of law in Vietnam.

Congress should advance this legislation because it's in the best interests of the United States as well as Vietnam.

Also, as a member of the Tom Lantos Commission on Human Rights, I have adopted various prisoners of conscience in Vietnam through their Defending Freedoms Project.

I'm going to continue to lend my name to these cases to bring attention to the suffering in Vietnam and to encourage the release of prisoners.

I do want to thank you for bringing attention to these important issues during your hearing today.

We must never stop raising our voices against Hanoi's actions. We must never stop

advocating for human rights in Vietnam. And we must always stand together in this cause for freedom.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Congresswoman Lofgren.

I would now like to introduce our witnesses for this morning's panel. Our first witness is Quynh-Vi Tran, the co-director of Legal Initiatives for Vietnam and editor-in-chief for The Vietnamese Magazine.

After her, we will hear from Dr. Thang Nguyen, CEO and President of Boat People SOS.

Our third witness is the Venerable Thach Truong Dhammo, President of Khmer Krom Buddhist Monks' Association of North America and a leader in International Religious Freedom of Khmer Krom Federation.

Our final witness is Dr. Quoc-Hung Tran, who goes by David, and is part of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

So we will turn to—and let me just say

also each person's full biography can be found on our website, and we will include the link in the chat.

Thank you all for testifying this morning, and we will turn to our first witness, Ms. Tran.

Ms. Tran.

MS. TRAN: Yes, hi, good morning.

Thank you for having me to testify here today.

My experience in working on the reporting on the religious rights in Vietnam during the past four years has unequivocally highlighted the absence of true freedom of religion inside that country.

While the government proclaims a semblance of religious tolerance, the reality is quite different. The stringent regulations outlined in the Law on Religions and Belief and subsequent decrees have effectively curtailed religious practices leading to a lack of faith freedom.

The contemporary framework that governs religious practices, management and operations in

Vietnam is predominantly defined by the Law on Religions and Beliefs, which I will refer to as LRB herein.

The Vietnamese government has direct interference in religious practices, and it does this in three ways:

First, it influences religious formation. In contrast to legal systems that permit religions and beliefs as long as they do not disrupt societal order, Vietnam mandates that adherence to registration procedures outlined in the LRB is imperative for religious legality.

These processes are intricately elaborate and encapsulated in a few chapters of the LRB.

To legally engaged in religious activities, organizations must secure a certificate for religious operations, contingent upon several requisites. These include the presence of complete religious doctrines, adherence to Vietnamese law, a lawful headquarters, and the absence of proscribed religious ideologies.

Once granted this certificate, an entity

is deemed a religious group. Yet, this is not the terminus of religious control.

After five years, these groups must reapply to be formally recognized as religious organizations, a legal status that affords more comprehensive participation in transactions than religious groups.

While ostensibly rational, this framework offers authorities a mechanism to expunge non-conforming religious elements.

For an example, I will talk about the case of An Dan Dai Dao, which exemplifies this manipulation. Established as a Buddhist sect in 1969, and operated legally under the Republic of Vietnam, An Dan Dai Dao became a target after the Communist takeover in 1975.

Accusations of CIA collaboration led to noncompliance with registration procedures, rendering An Dan Dai Dao a criminal group.

Although An Dan Dai Dao sought to reestablish itself in 2003, persecution endured, culminating in severe sentences for its leaders.

Phan Van Thu, An Dan Dai Dao top leader, was sentenced to a life imprisonment, and he died in prison in November 2022.

Secondly, the government can intrude into religious practices.

Even when religion gains legal recognition, the ability to practice is restricted by elaborate registration and notification procedures.

Concentrated religious activities mandate prior permission irrespective of affiliation or recognition.

Furthermore, religious organizations face many obligatory requirements, from submitting an annual list of activities to obtaining permissions for conferences, all underpinned by intrusive governmental oversight.

Lastly, the government can interfere with organizational structure.

The most invasive approach involves structural manipulation, exemplified by the government's authority over high-ranking religious

appointments, elections or transfers.

Foreign elements and appointments demand adherence to vague Vietnamese law and necessitate prior state approval.

A case in point is the usurpation of Cao Dai, where a government-controlled organization claimed the identity of the original religion, subjugating its identity and leadership.

The comprehensive controls on religious formation, practice and organizational structure underscore the intricate measures employed to exert control over the spiritual domain.

The Vietnamese government creates and fosters an environment where religious groups are coerced to align with the state's sanctioned narrative.

The need for continuous government oversight and permission for even the most basic religious gatherings underscores the lack of autonomy that believers face.

Furthermore, the cases of religious organizations like An Dan Dai Dao I mentioned

illustrate the alarming extent to which dissenting beliefs are suppressed.

The government's manipulation of organizational structures, appointment processes, and the imposition of criminal penalties on religious leaders who dare to challenge the status quo demonstrate a systemic effort to eliminate any form of religious expressions that falls outside state control.

There is a stark contradiction between the country's proclaimed commitment to freedom of religion and the intricate web of regulations and interventions that suffocate religious diversity and expression.

The absence of genuine freedom of religion is palpable and underscores the urgency of addressing this issue.

What key factors have influenced the Vietnamese Communist Party's policy on religious control?

From what I have gathered, the Vietnamese Communist Party, the VCP, comprehends how religious

groups can rally people together, and it's determined to maintain its supremacy in the nation without any significant opposition influence.

Functioning as an authoritarian state with a single-party governing structure, the VCP is acutely aware of the impact religion can have on specific population segments.

Looking back, consider the Vietnam War era when tensions between the South Vietnam and Buddhist community led to a chaotic period that could have potentially destabilized the southern region.

Drawing lessons from this historic episode, the VCP internalized the importance of this lesson. This is why Vietnam currently permits only the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha to operate as a recognized religious entity within the country.

Interestingly, this sangha also holds membership within the VCP's Fatherland Front, and several of its leaders are affiliated with the VCP.

In contrast, the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, which was formed in the 1960s, is

prohibited in Vietnam.

And as you may recall, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, who held strong religious beliefs, faced imprisonment and lived under house arrest until his passing in 2020.

The VCP labeled him as a reactionary force due to his religious convictions.

We would like to give out some recommendations for Vietnam.

Vietnam must show its commitment to upholding numerous human rights treaties that it has signed and ratified. As a current member of the Human Rights Council, Vietnam stands at a pivotal juncture, urging a thoughtful reconsideration of its Law on Religions and Beliefs.

The imperative for reform emerges as a beacon for progress, for the vitality of religious freedom cannot flourish within a paradigm where spiritual institutions and adherents find themselves entangled in a cumbersome process, petitioning the government for the legal

recognition necessary to function.

The essence of genuine religious liberty is rooted in an environment that nurtures faith without encumbrances.

Ponder for a moment: how might individuals' cherished convictions and beliefs be earnestly honored if they remain beholden to the authority's endorsement? An authentic expression of spirituality inherently demands autonomy and agency, free from the constraints of bureaucratic validation.

Vietnam's role on the global stage, particularly with the Human Rights Council, presents a remarkable opportunity to champion the cause of religious freedom in earnest.

By recalibrating its approach to the Law on Religions and Beliefs, Vietnam can showcase its dedication to fostering an inclusive society where everyone can embrace their faith without impediment.

In doing so, it exemplifies its commitment to human rights and sets precedent for harmonious

coexistence and shared progress.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Ms. Tran.

We will now proceed to our next speaker,
Dr. Thang. Dr. Thang.

DR. THANG: Thank you, distinguished
commissioners, for this important and timely
hearing.

It is evident that religious persecution
in Vietnam has gotten significantly worse in recent
years. The Department of State has recognized this
backsliding by placing Vietnam on its Special Watch
List.

I support USCIRF's position that Vietnam
deserves to be on the other list, the CPC List.

As for the backsliding, I would like to
point out three alarming trends:

One, increased forced conversion and
renunciation of faith; two, the expanding role of
government-controlled churches as instruments of
repression; and three, the government's more
frequent use of transnational repression to silence

and threaten human rights defenders among the Vietnamese diaspora.

In June and July of this year alone, hundreds of Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands have been forced to leave their unregistered churches and join the government-backed Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South, or ECVN-South.

An entire congregation, for instance, of 200, over 200 members of the Good News Mission Church in Dak Lak Province ceased to exist altogether due to forced conversion of all of its members recently in July.

Even members of government-approved churches have been forced to renounce their faith over the past six months.

Tens of cases of Hmong Christians in Nghe An Province, in one district, in one province, have been forced to renounce their faith, and many of them have to leave their home village or evicted from their homes.

Three Hmong sisters recently arrived in

Thailand from that area, two carrying each an infant, while the third one had to leave her two sons behind.

They had managed to conceal their Christian faith for five years before being discovered by government authorities, which immediately banished them from their village and threatened them with imprisonment should they return.

They're all members of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North, which has been legally recognized by the government.

The Vietnamese government has increasingly used government-created religious organizations, such as the Buddhist Church of Vietnam, BCV, or the Cao Dai sect that the government created in 1997 to subdue and/or eliminate religious groups that resist government control.

The BCV, for instance, was created by the government in 1981, just a few months after the government outlawed the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

Based on outrageous allegations by two BCV monks—that's the government created church—the police in Long An Province decided recently to prosecute a small Buddhist group named Thien Am Ben Bo Vu Tru, Zen Hermitage on the Edge of the Universe.

By the way, USCIRF and State Department reports did refer to this case.

These allegations included distorting Buddhist teaching, using Buddhist terminologies, and wearing Buddhist outfits without BCV's prior approval and characterizing in a private conversation one of these two BCV clerics as ignorant.

In July of last year, the People's Court of Long An Province sentenced this Zen Hermitage founder, 90-years-old man, and five of his disciples a total of 23-1/2 years in prison under Article 331 that Commissioner Ueland just mentioned.

And what is more outrageous is that these three human rights lawyers who represented these

victims recently fled to the U.S. to avoid arrest under exactly the same Article 331.

And USCIRF is well aware of the plight of the Cao Dai Church, which Ms. Vi Tran just mentioned. It was banished in the early 1990s, and in 1997, the government created a new sect that has nothing to do with the Cao Dai religion, as a matter of fact, because the new sect doesn't believe in the most basic fundamental religious tenet of Cao Daiism, and that is the direct communion between God, the creator, the super being, and humanity.

Cao Dai followers attempting to enter the "Holy See" in Tay Ninh have been brutally beaten by Sect members.

And over the past ten years, Sect members have proceeded to seize some 300 Cao Dai temples by force and usually with the support of police. To a casual observer, the Cao Dai religion is thriving, but that appearance is deceiving because those occupying the Cao Dai temples and the Holy See of the Cao Dai religion are actually not true Cao Dai

believers.

And what is really alarming is that the government has increasingly targeted human rights defenders among the Vietnamese diaspora. They are exporting repression against U.S. citizens on U.S. soil.

Four months ago, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security announced criminal prosecution against Pastor A Ga. Many of you have met him. He is the founder of the Evangelical Church of Christ at the Central Highlands and a resident of North Carolina.

To stop and reverse the backsliding, human rights, particularly religious freedom, should be an integral part of the U.S.-Vietnam strategic partnership, which would be the primary focus of President Biden's upcoming state visit to Vietnam.

I see that as an opportunity to expand the space for religious freedom in Vietnam if we do it right. With that in mind, I recommend that, one:

The Biden Administration reaches agreement with Vietnam on a framework of systemic reforms

that incorporates the principle of reciprocity, specific timelines for implementation, and consequences for noncompliance.

Equally important is a mechanism to ensure promised reforms are truly taking place, violations are properly resolved, and affected individuals and communities have a voice as part of that framework as well as the mechanism.

USCIRF-I recommend that USCIRF provides the platform for persecuted religious and ethnic communities in Vietnam to be part of that mechanism.

For example, USCIRF can maintain periodic meetings with persecuted churches, bring the issues to the attention of the appropriate U.S. and Vietnamese authorities, and help them to follow through.

And USCIRF may also reach out to government-controlled churches and impress on them the importance of respecting religious freedom for all.

Number three, Congress should pass the

Vietnam Human Rights Act that Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren mentioned.

Furthermore, members of Congress can also ensure that incidents of transnational repression affecting their constituents be acted upon resolutely and effectively by the administration.

And, finally, the administration, Congress, and USCIRF take advantage of Vietnam's membership in the U.N. Human Rights Council by capitalizing on recommendations of U.N. mandate holders and press Vietnam to comply with U.N. human rights standards, including Article 18 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights.

Thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Dr. Thang, and we'll look forward to questions with you and Ms. Tran shortly.

We'll now turn to the Venerable Dhammo. Venerable Dhammo, please.

And you are on mute. It looks like we may still be having issues with the audio from the

Venerable Dhammo. Perhaps while we get that audio squared away, we will go to our next witness and speaker, and we'll hear from Dr. Tran, and, Venerable Dhammo, we'll come back to you once we work out the technical issues related to the audio.

Dr. Tran.

DR. TRAN: Vice Chair, commissioners, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank USCIRF for allowing me to present testimony at this important event.

For more than 40 years, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, or UBCV, has been calling for freedom of religion and human rights in Vietnam and legal status for itself.

The UBCV was founded 60 years ago in 1964 to gather Buddhist associations into one organization. After April 30, 1975, all the church properties were confiscated by the Vietnamese authorities.

To demand religious freedom, 12 Buddhist monks and nuns at Duoc Su Temple immolated themselves. The authorities reacted by arresting

our six leading figures, one of whom, the Most Venerable Thich Thien Minh, was beaten to death in prison.

That was the beginning of four decades of persecution and suppression of the UBCV by the Vietnamese authorities.

The charter of UBCV consists of a bicameral system: a leadership office of the Patriarch and an executive body of the Dharma Institute.

The Dharma Institute consists of several departments and offices. I am the Director of Communications and run the Office of External Affairs.

The authorities impose a range of restrictions on our religious practice, such as registration requirements, controlled [?], and surveillance on temples and houses of worship.

The police would close the temple gates with padlocks, further securing the locks with superglue.

In January 2019, the Most Venerable Thich

Tri Quang [ph], the former president of the Dharma Institute, was isolated this way within the [?] temple [?].

The Most Venerable passed away only two months later on March 5, 2019.

Buddhist Youth Organizations are often prevented from gathering. These children, as young as seven years old, recounted stories of hiding in bushes and running way from the police so they could attend their weekly activities.

In 2020, the local authorities confiscated our humanitarian donations and prohibited the storm victims to receive aid on the ground that the UBCV was a, quote, "illegal church," unquote, and receiving aid from the UBCV was against the law.

On the morning of September 18, 2022, uniformed police surrounded the Paramita Temple, verbally harassed the Most Venerable Thich Nhat Ban, our current president of the Dharma Institute, and forced his followers to leave.

The police proceeded to destroy items in his residence and threatened to stab him with a

knife.

For the last three years, he has not been allowed to attend any of our UBCV functions.

On April 19, 2023, the police detained without cause our Patriarch and our Secretary General. They were subjected to several hours of interrogation regarding religious texts produced the year before, which were deemed "reactionary," quote-unquote, by the authorities.

The persecution has also become more sophisticated with the authorities interfering in our governance, fostering internal dissent, promoting their choice of leadership, and providing false narratives to religious oppression.

Most recently, they were able to pressure our last Patriarch at the age of 92 and with dementia to issue verdicts to dismantle the Dharma Institute, even the overseas office of the Institute, based in the U.S.

Our members were prevented from visiting him and participating in his funeral. His will was changed, and his ashes were disposed in the ocean

contrary to his wish.

Our current Patriarch has been isolated in his temple and his disciples are not allowed to visit him.

The UBCV also suffers from the general persecution of religions by the ruling Communist Party. Many Vietnamese peoples' profession of faith is influenced by the authorities' view that religions reflect a backward mindset incompatible with socialism. And religious participation indicates a wavering loyalty to the Party.

In a country where 55 percent of the people identify themselves as Buddhists, according to statistics from the government Committee for Religious Affairs, Buddhists only account for only 14.9 percent of the total population.

The low count has unintended psychological effect and is probably the gravest form of persecution.

The UBCV welcomed Vietnam's placement on the State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in and tolerating severe violations of

religious freedom.

As victims of systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, the UBCV affirms that Vietnam meets the standard for designation as a Country of Particular Concern.

Thank you for your kind attention.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Dr. Tran, and we will now go back to the Venerable Dhammo and hear his remarks. Venerable Dhammo.

VENERABLE DHAMMO: Can you hear me?

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: We can. Thank you.

VENERABLE DHAMMO: Good morning.

Dear distinguished guests, commissioners, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Venerable TT Dhammo. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify about the religious oppression faced by the Khmer-Krom community in Vietnam as they practice Theravada Buddhism.

It is an honor to share the challenge with you and appeal for their religious freedom.

The Khmer-Krom people have cherished Theravada Buddhism since 365 BCE, and their temples

are not just places of worship, but centers of education and cultural preservation.

However, despite Vietnam's constitution, guaranteeing religious freedom, the Khmer Krom cannot establish independent religious organization.

The Law on Belief and Religion in 2016 has been weaponized against those voicing concern about their religious rights. The VBS now controls Khmer-Krom practice, changing temple stamps, and identification, compelling participation in state-mandated workshops, restricting the Khmer language, and criticizing teaching curricula.

In July 2021, authorities barred Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers from building a religious hall in a remote hamlet in Vinh Long province, where they sought solace and education.

Imagine needing permission to express your faith. That is a piece of Khmer-Krom spirit to be Buddhist monks. Venerable Doung Khai's case in 2023 facing bureaucratic hurdle for ordination illustrated this erosion of rights.

Vietnam is micromanaging the Khmer-Krom religious practice, mandating workshops to control temple operations. This violates religious freedom and assertions that our temples won't survive without state intervention is offensive.

On July 31, three Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers, Thach Cuong, To Hoang Chuong, Danh Minh Quang, were arrested for their advocacy involving distributing the U.N. documents advocating for their religious and indigenous rights. They are now in prison, their alleged crime of abusing democratic freedom under Article 331 of the Vietnamese Criminal Code.

On August 3, Mrs. Dinh Thi Huynh, a Khmer-Krom woman Buddhist follower, was arrested because of her advocacy. She went to attend the International Women Days on March 8, 2023, in Tra Vinh province and advocated for the Khmer-Krom community's fundamental rights. She is facing alleged crime of "failure to serve a judgment" for Article 380 of the Vietnamese Criminal Code.

As a Buddhist monk, I'm speaking from my

heart. I urge the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to release Thach Cuong, To Hoang Chuong, Danh Minh Quang, and Dinh Thi Huynh unconditionally.

And number two, respect Khmer-Krom religious freedom, allowing the Theravada Buddhist organizations without interference.

And number three, revise the Law on Belief and Religion to ensure genuine religious freedom.

And number three, and number four—I'm sorry—stop threats to demolish the religious hall in Vinh Long province.

And number five, allow Khmer-Krom monks to teach their own Khmer language freely.

And number six, end violence against Khmer-Krom monks defending their rights.

And number seven, remind Vietnam that religious freedom is a right, not a privilege at all.

And thank you for this opportunity. Let's unite against this oppression, safeguarding Khmer-Krom religious freedom and culture.

Together we promote human rights and equality building a world founded on respect and dignity.

Thank you so much.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Venerable Dhammo. We really appreciate your comments and the comments of all the witnesses.

We're now going to turn to our commissioners who are with us today for questions, and we will start with Commissioner Frank Wolf.

Commissioner Wolf. And Commissioner Wolf, you are on mute also.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: I want to thank Vice Chair for the hearing and thank USCIRF staff for the hearing, and thank the witnesses.

As you were speaking, I wrote a lot of notes down, and so I hope I can keep my train of thought, but, first of all, the word that sticks out, as Dr. Thang said, it's getting worse. It's getting worse.

I have a very good, a very close friend, whose name I will not mention, whose son lives in

Vietnam, and he comes and tells me, he says, Frank, everything is good in Vietnam. He said I was there last month, and it was wonderful.

I was downtown and everything else. The American media, The Washington Post, the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, they have failed, quite frankly, to tell what is going on in Vietnam.

And I was just taken by all the four of you, the comments. It was, and then the pain of hearing how they're treating elderly people, 90, one gentleman 90, one 90, 92.

I guess the question I would have, and I have a couple, is what is the most bold dramatic, particularly since President Biden will be there this Sunday.

We also see that Vietnam is worried about China. They have a 1,300 mile border with China. They're worried what China is doing. They're worried about what China is going to do.

What is the boldest thing that we can do, the American government can do, with regard to changing what's taking place currently in Vietnam?

The boldest, not just the little resolution, little bit of this, but what is the boldest thing that we could do bring about a change in Vietnam?

DR. THANG: Well, may I answer this question?

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Sure.

DR. THANG: The boldest thing is, for instance, for the Cao Dai religion, the church was abolished, outlawed in the 1990s, and then the government created a new sect that has nothing to do with the Cao Dai religion, and they become the imposter.

But now they occupy the Holy See of the Cao Dai religion and 300 temples of the Cao Dai that they seized from the Cao Dai followers.

Now, the good news is that last month, a court in Texas ruled that the 1997 Sect is a criminal organization because we presented to them all these beatings of the Cao Dai followers, all the expropriation of their properties, and so forth.

So the court in Texas ruled that the Cao

Dai, the 1997 Sect, is a criminal organization that has committed criminal activities in the U.S. affecting U.S. citizens.

So the plaintiffs, the Cao Dai followers, in Dallas, Texas, and they were awarded by the judge 200,000 U.S. dollars in compensation for damages.

That's not much, but the ramification is huge. USCIRF can, for instance, send a delegation to Vietnam and accompany the real Cao Dai clerics, the real Cao Dai clergy members and followers and bring them to visit, to enter their own Holy See that they have been banished from entering for the past 30 years.

So you can do that, and say, hey, these are the real genuine Cao Dai leaders, the Cao Dai followers. So why the government of Vietnam is supporting an organization that has been deemed and ruled by the Texas courts as a criminal organization under the RICO law, Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organizations law?

So that's something very bold and it might

have a great impact right there. Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Dr. Tran.

DR. TRAN: I guess the boldest move, to answer Commissioner Frank Wolf, that I can think of is that when you talk with the monks and the nuns in Vietnam, the things that they complain about, is the fact that they're blocked out on the Internet.

I think that as they are persecuted, a lot of the teaching has gone digital, and I think just something that we could also do is to pressure companies like Facebook to not block the accounts of religious leaders in Vietnam.

And I think to have the Facebook restriction lifted, I think that would be a bold move. And it's something that we could do.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Ms. Tran.

MS. TRAN: Yes. Mr. Wolf, you asked for the boldest move that the U.S. could make.

According to my own personal opinion, the U.S. had to say it out to Vietnam to get rid of the

registration, all of the classification process in its Laws on Religions and Beliefs.

How could we have religion freedom when the government only approves certain organizations as religions?

I mean they only recognize about 16 religion groups. And as the Unified Buddhist Sangha was not allowed to be functioning in the country, that's not religious freedom.

I think the boldest move is to say you have to amend and fix your law to comply with the human rights treaties that have been signed by [?] by calling this under our law.

I think the law, it is not suited with human rights treaties that the government has signed, even now as a member of the Human Rights Council. Those laws need to be fixed and need to be amended and amended according to international human rights law, not like the past when they amended their penal code to make sure that the law is more outrageous and more suppressive of the human rights defenders.

But that, to me, is the boldest move that, you know, name them and tell them this is not okay. If you wanted to be a strategic partner with the U.S. and have this law on restricting the freedom of the people, it should not be okay.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Ms. Tran.

Venerable Dhammo, would you like to respond to Commissioner Wolf? Venerable Dhammo, would you like to respond to Commissioner Wolf?

VENERABLE DHAMMO: Yes.

According to my experience when I was in Vietnam until right now, what's happening with especially with Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks, practitioners include our follower.

We tried to help again and again. You know, the Vietnamese government, they do not allow us to be like try to establish our own independent religious organization. Because of the [?], I am [?] because I'm between Theravada Buddhism with most of the Vietnamese, including some panels, you know, on Zoom also they practice Mahayana Buddhism, but otherwise we are Theravada Buddhist

practitioners. It is totally different.

Even also the way of trending, reciting, practices, totally different. So that's why are Buddhists and we are Theravada Buddhist school. We try to act as commissioner, and even also the authority there try to establish our own organization.

So in order to preserve our culture over 2000 years ago, even around 375 BCE, one of our oldest Buddhist temple were built in [?] in southern Vietnam. So that's why we would like to ask you, sir, to appear as a Vietnamese authority, include the commissioner, tried to interfere with that.

And thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Venerable Dhammo.

Commissioner Wolf, did you have another question?

COMMISSIONER WOLF: No. I want to pass. I want to just thank you very much, and hopefully this hearing will spur the administration to be

much more aggressive than it is, and it will spur the American church to speak out more than it has.

And it will spur the American media to speak out and hopefully will spur the Congress to do something dramatic to make a difference for the people of Vietnam.

But thank you all. I appreciate it.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Commissioner Wolf.

Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Vice Chairman.

You know, I have many specific questions, but I have one overarching question that I'd like to ask.

You know, there's a theory that with economic development, countries become more free. And certainly what we see in Vietnam is extraordinary economic development taking place everywhere, and yet at the same time, in regards to religious freedom, and frankly in regards to other human rights, we see a reverse direction occurring.

That is things are backsliding, and so my general question, and I pose this to all of the panelists is, is why? Why is the Vietnamese government doing this? What do they hope to gain out of this?

It just rationally makes no sense to us, and I'm curious speaking here as a foreigner who really does not understand the ins and outs of the way things are in Vietnam, why is the government actually doing this? What's behind this extraordinarily horrible policy?

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Dr. Thang, do you want to start?

DR. THANG: Yes, please. Yes, thank you.

There are two reasons why Vietnam, the Vietnamese authorities, want to control religion is that, one, people are afraid. They place their faith in the higher being, higher than the Communist Party. So the Vietnamese Communist Party cannot accept that.

Two, religions bring people together. So when people are brought together, they start to

become a force to contend with, and the Vietnamese government views that as the potential threat to their monopoly on power.

That's why they cannot tolerate, and not just Vietnam. Any other Communist regime, they seem exactly the same because they want to hang on to power so they view religions that they cannot control, they cannot control, as a threat to their existence and their continuation of being in power.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Dr. Tran.

DR. TRAN: I'd like to second the sentiment by Dr. Thang.

I think that we've seen ten years of comprehensive—I'm sorry—of comprehensive partnership with Vietnam, and there has not been significant improvement in human rights or religious freedom.

I think that the model that we can see similarity with is that of China. I think the more the economy of a country has developed, the ruling party feels more threatened, more of a need to

control the people, especially the civil society section, and to make sure that that doesn't become a force of change within the country.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Ms. Tran.

MS. TRAN: Yes. I also agree with what Dr. Thang had said, and I think I mentioned it in my testimony why the VCP wants to control religions. Because they are afraid of mobilization of the people.

Now back to your question, why would the Vietnamese government go against the theory that we always think the economic development would foster the country freer.

It was a theory that I strongly opposed during the time Vietnam signed the EVFTA with the EU because EU had the same mentality, that if we sign this trade agreement with them, economy will be better. And I still remember what the EU delegation told me in 2018, that I should put more faith in the government, that with economic development, they would improve the human rights

record.

And as a Vietnamese person, I do not believe so. And I told them they will suppress people more when they have this trade agreement.

Why? Because they are in control of everything. It is not just a political party. This is a power regime. They have everything within their hands.

The development in Vietnam, yes, it developed, but who gained that economic power? It's just only a few, small percentage of that country, have gained through this development; right?

So if you are on the top with no other opposition, why would you want to let that go? I think the answer for your concern is that it doesn't matter if the economy be good or bad, the better, the better for us, because they're on the top and they control everything.

If you think when you have people who came from Vietnam, you know, the foreigners who came there and came back and said Vietnam has changed,

it's different, it's fun, it's good, it's because they are a privileged group of people.

If I do not do this work, right, if I go back to Vietnam as a lawyer, who graduated from the U.S. and gained all these privileges, of course, I would get treated better, and I've been treated very well before I joined the human rights and democracy movement.

But it showed that's the mentality of the people who are in control, and I would not think the development in Vietnam would benefit the majority of the population.

And I think it is a matter that this government in Vietnam will have to figure it out themselves later when the mass became actually not richer when the economic development happened.

So I think that's just my trying to rationalize why the government has been trying to do this, and they would just want to get rid of everything.

In Vietnam we have no opposition force. We're not even like in Cambodia. We don't have an

opposing force to the government. We only have the government, and with the unchecked, unbalanced, I think they would just hold on to that, that power as much as possible.

And they would have to get rid of people who dared to stand against their authority.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Ms. Tran.

And Venerable Dhammo, would you like to respond?

VENERABLE DHAMMO: Yes, of course, and thank you again for the opportunity.

My concern here, even the regime, the Communist Vietnamese regime totally also control the people, but the reality also, they cannot control the spiritual practice or spiritual journey, especially also with our Buddhist monk, even also we live under the yoke of the Communist regime, seeing the collapse of the South, North from the South, 1975 until right now, almost 50 years.

But our people still live under the poverty level. It's been at the bottom of the

society actually in Vietnam because we are considered as a minority and indigenous people who live in southern Vietnam.

But especially with our Buddhism monk, we still, you know, under pressure of the Vietnam, but we try our best so in order to maintain and cooperated.

But Vietnam, the Communists of Vietnam is very kind of like dangerous. It's [?]. So in order to implement or to advocate, some of our, you know, elderly or senior monks, in order to cooperate with authority there, so the way that they treat our people poorly. So sometimes we see that these are outside [?], but in reality, inside, they try to sneak it in, which means that they try to interfere, interfere our community, with the Buddhist of Khmer-Krom community in Vietnam.

So that's the way it is. Vietnam still tries to do the way that they try to control it, but it doesn't want to raise an issue.

Please, commissioner, before also U.S. government try to do a trip with Vietnam, to be

carefully and consider with most people who live in the rural area.

And thank you.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you. Thank you all, all the panelists.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: And Commissioner Schneck, did you have another question?

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: No, I just want to express my gratitude for their witness once more.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Great. Thank you. Commissioner Curry.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Yes. Thank you very much.

Great questions so far and a lot of courage on behalf of those testifying. I have some friends myself in Vietnam as part of my network in my other role, and some of them, seeing their fear in talking about what's happening there really just gives me deep respect for what you're doing today.

A couple of questions. These are pretty specific from my own understanding. Dr. Thang, you mentioned forced conversion. I think it's

important for people to understand what that looks like.

Could you describe some of what Vietnam is doing as regards to forced conversion? Is it detaining them in their homes until they-or are there detaining facilities, which some countries have, often will deny?

Maybe you could talk a little bit about forced conversion. Then I have a follow-up on another point as well.

DR. THANG: Yes. Forced conversion works this way. For instance, in July 1, 2004, the government crushed the movement of house churches in the Central Highlands that affects tens of thousands of Montagnard Christians, and for that reason, Vietnam got designated a CPC country.

And at the time, most of these Montagnard Christians that belong in the government approved ECVN. That's Evangelical Church of Vietnam South. And they feel betrayed because that church didn't speak out at all in their defense.

Hundreds ended up in prison. Many got

tortured to death. And therefore they left ECVN South to form their own house churches, unregistered, unaffiliated.

So in recent years, church members have been told and ordered to abandon their house churches and rejoin ECVN-South. If they refuse to, they will be arrested, they have been threatened. Many of them have been threatened that they'd be arrested and imprisoned.

So in exchange for prison time, they have to sign a document, a pre-printed document acknowledging that they are no longer members of their independent house church and now they've become, and they rejoined the ECVN-South, and that's how it works.

The Cao Dai followers, for instance, most of their temples have been seized by the Cao Dai Sect, set up, created by the government of Vietnam in 1997. And now the only way for them to come back to go back to their temple to worship, and practice their religion, is for them to convert to that sect.

So that's how it works.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you very much.

And then I think it was Dr. David Tran who may have mentioned something about Facebook restrictions on religious leaders.

I'm very curious about that because, you know, I'm wondering what it looks like and to what degree is this widespread?

But I could have gotten it wrong. It was an aside that was dropped in there, and several people have spoken since then.

But whomever that was? Was that you, Dr. Tran, that mentioned that?

DR. TRAN: Yes, I think that was in answer to Commissioner Frank Wolf. It's a widespread [?] leaders of the UBCV and even within the Sangha of the UBCV, I think we, it's a common report and complaint from our people that the most active members usually get Facebook restricted and not allowed access.

I think the Most Venerable—I'm blanking his name—but he was the abbot at [?] temple, which

was demolished in 2018, his Facebook account has been restricted, and he has been asking for help to have it, the restriction, removed, and the report is it's a very common practice to stop people from complaining about lack of religious freedom.

DR. THANG: May I add one more point here, if I may, to answer your question?

Dr. Tran mentioned something very important as part of forced conversion of faith. There is a practice of denial of personal documents. [?] is the one that you mentioned.

DR. TRAN: That's the one.

DR. THANG: Who has no personal documents. So he's undocumented in his own country. Hundreds of thousands of Hmong and Montagnard Christians are now undocumented in their own country.

So the government uses personal documents, citizenship ID, as a way to force people either abandon their faith or to convert to and join a government controlled church.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thanks.

DR. TRAN: Let me add also, the forced

conversion within the UBCV is that a lot of our temples have been in existence before 1975. So that was 50 years ago. And a lot of them are in disrepair, and part of the coercion here is that if you don't join up with the government sanctioned church, then we won't allow repair.

We won't allow you to have access to equipment or supplies to repair your church. And I think eventually people either give up or join with the government sanctioned church or they get old and die, and they get replaced by someone else who belongs to the government sanctioned church.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Commissioner Curry, any other questions?

COMMISSIONER CURRY: I should—I have lots of them, but I want to give the other commissioners a chance.

Thank you so much, everybody.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Commissioner Gelman.

COMMISSIONER GELMAN: Thank you, Vice Chair Davie, and thank you so much to our panelists

for really a very heartrending but impressive summary of what you are facing, but you are working on.

So, first of all, I want to applaud you for your courage and your dedication. Please understand I am a brand new commissioner, and this is actually my first hearing. So if I ask something that maybe is not a conventional question, I hope I'm forgiven in advance.

As was mentioned a couple times earlier, the timing of this hearing is very propitious given that the president will be traveling shortly to the region.

And my question to each of our distinguished panelists really has to do with what messages are you trying to convey to the administration that the President should carry when he is meeting with the authorities in Vietnam?

That's one question.

Second, are there specific things that you are asking the Congress to do? I mean we heard from Zoe Lofgren, and clearly her commitment to the

Vietnamese people—and I'm from the Bay Area myself. I'm from San Francisco.

I didn't realize that San Jose has the largest Vietnamese population in the U.S., but I'm not surprised by that.

So is there anything that's on the table right now in front of Congress that perhaps USCIRF could help to support?

And then my last question really is more of a societal one. I mean you talked a great deal about the repression of religion and the fact that people are really being forced in the most awful ways not to practice their religion freely.

I'm wondering a little bit about the younger generation. I mean understanding this is not an open and free society in Vietnam. But where does the younger generation of young people—where do younger Vietnamese fall on this? Are they just used to a situation where they don't really have religious freedom, and maybe it's not a priority for them?

Or do you see some, some hope on the

horizon somehow, which I don't even know what that would be?

But those are my questions, and thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Dr. Tran.

DR. TRAN: A few years ago before his death, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do [ph] made a declaration to the Vietnamese authorities, also internationally, and that has been our formal policy.

Personally, I have a chance to repeat these eight points very quickly. Number one, to recognize the legitimate status of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and all other non-recognized religious communities and allow them full freedom of religious activity.

Second, release all UBCV clergy and followers detained under house arrest or in prison on account of non-violent exercise or expression of their religious beliefs.

Thirdly, cease harassment and intimidation of UBCV followers, including members of the BYO,

Buddhist Youth Organization. Allow them the freedom to engage in educational, spiritual, humanitarian, and social activities for the development of the people.

Number four, restore all UBCV properties confiscated after 1945 in the North and after 1975 in the South.

Number five, repeal and revise all religious legislations which restrict activities of religious organizations and submit them to the control of the Communist Party.

Amend the Law on Belief and Religion and to bring it in line with Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Number six, remove vaguely worded provision in the Criminal Code that criminalized exercise of freedom of religions or belief.

Number seven, revise the cybersecurity law and other laws regarding freedom of expression online, offline, to conform with the rights enshrined in Article 19 of ICCPR.

Number eight, guarantee the fundamental rights to freedom of conscience, expression,

assembly, and association as guaranteed in the U.N. ICCPR and to which Vietnam is a state party.

To answer the last question by the commissioner, I think that our Buddhist Youth Organization has been, has also been outlawed. They're a part of the UBCV, and the only youth organization that's recognized by the, by the authorities is the Communist Ho Chi Minh Youth Organization. Everybody else is outlawed including our BYO.

A lot of the kids are being harassed. I mean young children being harassed and being, their parents being harassed and not allowed to attend the religious activities.

I'm saddened, very saddened by this, and I think this is one of the most egregious violations imaginable.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Ms. Tran, do you have anything else?

MS. TRAN: Yes.

Thank you, Commissioner Gelman.

I, for the first part of your questions, what I would love to have President Biden to carry on his mind when he arrives in Vietnam in a few days. I was born in Vietnam. I am also a Vietnam citizen, but I am a U.S. citizen, as well, because I grew up over here, and I grew up in San Jose.

To me, I think our president has to hold steadfast to our conviction that human rights are universal, and the U.S. will uphold universal rights everywhere, including in its dealing with countries like China and Vietnam.

I don't think we need to tolerate a country like Vietnam on its human rights record so that we have gained an ally to set against China.

I think Vietnam and China are the same. Vietnam is a little mini-country that tried to mimic China, and it will suppress the people, especially human rights activists, and people who yearn for their freedom, not only in religion, but in everything else.

So the U.S. has to stand and speak out and protect that universal right and saying that

fighting for human rights are an honorable act.

I felt kind of sad that for being here and testifying at this hearing to be deemed a courageous act because I'm speaking against the wrongdoings of the Vietnamese government.

I think the U.S. needs to really hold human rights as its core values and relate that to Vietnam and the Vietnamese government, that we are honoring these human rights defenders, and I hope the president will discuss on the imprisonment of the political prisoners in Vietnam, not only on religious leaders, but there are over 200 people who are in prison in Vietnam because they are fighting for their rights.

They are not proposing any violent revolution. They only use speech and their expression to promote these rights and they are in prison of that.

So I hope the president will bring those issues up with the Vietnamese government and its leaders.

That's my really hope to gain from this

visit. I think when the U.S. wants to make friends with Vietnam, we also have to hold Vietnam accountable on its human rights records and make sure that they were trying to improve and do something and not like the four witnesses here today.

The government, the Vietnamese government, should not call us names, should not, you know, saying that what we are doing is wrong.

I think writing about human rights and democracy in Vietnam is an honorable job, but they are saying that, you know, people like us are committing criminal acts.

I have a cofounder who is now in prison for nine years, and she's been honored by our State Department as a courageous woman last year. So I think people like Phan Van Chan [ph] and other human rights activists should be honored and be released in prison because they only use their speech and their thoughts to communicate with the government.

And a government who has imprisoned those

people should not be a friend of the U.S., and I hope that the Vietnamese government will understand this in the upcoming visit.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Dr. Thang.

DR. THANG: Yes. Thank you.

To answer your question, Commissioner Gelman, I have three points to make very quickly.

One is that what do we hope from the upcoming state visit by President Biden to Vietnam? Two things. One is let's be practical, realistic. At least we'd like to see the president winning some concessions from Vietnam, for instance, the release of a number of prisoners of conscience, especially those that have been adopted by USCIRF, including [?], for instance.

Secondly, it's more important, he should make the foundation for engaging Vietnam long-term for genuine reforms. As mentioned before, that ought to come with a framework of commitments and also mechanism to monitor and evaluate and sanctioning.

And that kind of framework and mechanism would come naturally in any kind of trade agreement. Why not about human rights?

And the second point is about what members of Congress can do. I would suggest that now Vietnam is on the Special Watch List. Just follow the frame of IRFA, International Religious Freedom Act, by demanding that the State Department not only to report incidence of violations, but also point out who the perpetrators are behind those violations. And what kind of sanctions have been applied to those perpetrators? So that is the second thing.

Now, another thing members of Congress can do, and also USCIRF too, Commissioner and Congressman Wolf, you asked a very exciting question: what's the boldest move that we can make?

And one of the boldest moves is to create a forum where outlawed, banished churches, such as the Khmer-Krom Buddhist Church, such as the UBCV, such as many house churches that have been, have disappeared, get recognition, de facto recognition,

not by Vietnam, but by the U.S. Congress, by USCIRF.

Recognize them, elevate their presence, their legitimacy, and maybe you can establish a forum where you can invite leaders from the banished churches to sit down with government-created churches and talk to each other across the table.

That would be powerful because that would be de facto recognition of these outlawed churches.

And finally, you asked about youth. Unfortunately, many youth are now in prison.

Unfortunately, many of them are now seeking asylum in Thailand and be aware that there are now about 1,700 Vietnamese refugees asylum seekers. 90 percent of them are victims of religious persecution.

We should protect them as well. Get them to be resettled, get them to be recognized as refugees, and move them to a safe place.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Venerable Dhammo, a quick word?

VENERABLE DHAMMO: Yes.

So, again, yes, I am totally agree with whatever [inaudible] just mentioned about. But beside that, as a representative of Buddhist Khmer-Krom organization outside, we just would like to appeal with the formal trip administration Biden to Vietnam. We just would like to implore Vietnam is please release arrests and detention of our youth.

As just mentioned, with [?], because of their representative, because of the broader systematic human rights violation occurring within Vietnam because the Vietnam also is a member of the Human Rights Council. So that's what we would like to implore again, again.

So U.S. Commission on Human Rights please tell the government of Vietnam please to release our people now unconditionally.

And thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Commissioner Ueland, do you want to do a final thought before we adjourn?

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thanks, Vice Chair, and I think the only thing I'd like to say is to just join all my fellow commissioners and you, as well, in expressing both our appreciation and respect for the conversation this morning.

I think for us knowing that people here have friends, have family, have relationships with all sorts of people in Vietnam who may subsequently be harassed, we are in significant respect of the bravery and courage that you represent by standing up, speaking clearly, and coming to us today.

And I only hope that this conversation continues. I think there has been a lot of intriguing ideas on the table. We'll see what happens with President Biden and the conversation here over the next few days.

But I know for USCIRF, at least for me, I think all of our commissioners, we want to keep this work up. We want to, if we can, encourage Vietnam to live up to her international obligations and reverse this regression and find paths forward where we can work cooperatively in mutually

reinforcing ways to help the issue of religious freedom in Vietnam.

So, again, thank you all very much.

Fred.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Commissioner Ueland.

And I'd just like to also thank the panelists today. Again, I'd like to echo the deep respect we have for your courage, for your willingness to speak to us and, indeed, to speak to the world by being on this panel today, and to fight for human rights and particularly the freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam in this way.

I also want to just speak to the people that Commissioner Ueland and I along with one of our key staff met in Vietnam when we were there, just to speak to them and to say, you know, we have not forgotten you.

USCIRF stands with you. We heard you clearly during the visit, and we will continue to advocate with our government on your behalf to be able to exercise religious freedom without the

oppressive arm of the government restricting your ability to do that.

So just another thank you to those people in Vietnam with whom we met. Thank them for their courage and to let you know that USCIRF continues to stand with you.

And, then, finally, do an official welcome to Commissioner Gelman. I should have done that at the top of the hour, but we're so pleased to have you with us.

The substance and ease with which you asked your questions shows to us the wisdom that President Biden had in appointing you to this Commission, and we're very happy to have you with us.

COMMISSIONER GELMAN: Thank you so much, Vice Chair Davie.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you all.

Again, thanks to the witnesses, thanks to my fellow commissioners, thanks to the staff at USCIRF, and all who work on behalf of the freedom of religion or belief around the world.

That's all the time we have today. I want to thank again everyone for joining us. This hearing is adjourned.

Thank you.

[Chorus of thank yous.]

[Whereupon, at 12:00 o'clock noon ET, the hearing was adjourned.]