



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom

Remarks as Prepared:

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In recent decades, as Vice Chair 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 its recent human rights regression, such as the religious freedom violations we highlighted in our 2023 Annual Report.

We are 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 human rights 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 my colleague mentioned, but also the Criminal Code is a potent weapon for controlling and intimidating religious communities. Articles like 331 – which vaguely criminalizes the “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 met in Ho Chih 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 international human rights standards, 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 human rights, promote stability, and demonstrate the true worth of its partnership with the United States.

We have 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 greater secure religious freedom for all people in the country. In fact, when President Biden travels to Vietnam to sign a strategic partnership agreement on September 10, USCIRF calls on him to clearly and boldly include religious freedom in those conversations. This basic human right cannot be ignored for any sustainable relationship to proceed between the United States and Vietnam or any other country.

I will now turn the proceedings back over to Vice Chair Davie.