



Congress of the United States

House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4302

April 26, 2016

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20050

Mr. President:

I am writing to urge you to use your upcoming visit to Vietnam to improve the respect for basic human rights in Vietnam. It is especially important to raise the Vietnamese government's egregious violations of basic human rights now as Vietnam is actively seeking to deepen economic and trade partnerships with the United States. For twenty years the United States has cultivated a close relationship with the government of Vietnam, yet Vietnam remains a one-party state which treats its own citizens, especially those who share the U.S. commitment to freedom and democracy, in ways that systematically disregard the minimum human rights standards expected of any respectable government. I therefore encourage you to take a more direct approach with the government on these critical issues during your trip to Vietnam.

As a founder of the Congressional Victims' Rights Caucus, I believe it is critical that the Vietnamese government immediately ends the practice of forced labor and moves to prosecute officials of state-owned labor export companies that exploit workers. The Vietnamese government engages in human trafficking through forced labor in "rehabilitation" centers, detention centers, and prisons, as well as, by sending its citizens into modern-day slavery in countries around the world and punishing the victims who object to such horrific treatment.

Another concerning development is that the Vietnamese government appears to have intensified its crackdown on dissidents and independent religious communities. The torture to death of several Montagnard Christian leaders, the forced renunciation of faith aimed at members of the Christian, Buddhist, Khmer Krom Buddhist, Cao Dai, Montagnard, and Hmong communities, and the recent arrests of human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, are just some of the appalling examples. Unfortunately, the injustice continues even after such prisoners of conscience are released. Pastor Duong Kim Khai is a Mennonite who has dedicated his life to peaceably fight for social justice and religious freedom. He was released after six years of imprisonment for "attempting to overthrow the people's government." Ironically, he was released under conditions of house arrest, but the Vietnamese government had already evicted Pastor Khai and his family from their house, so he had no home in which to be under "house arrest". This persecution of political prisoners is unconscionable and I encourage this Administration to insist that the Vietnamese government unconditionally frees all of the political prisoners and prisoners of conscience it currently unjustly holds. I respectfully request you do everything in your power to express that U.S. will not stand for such atrocious transgressions of human rights, especially as the United States government prepares to enter an even closer relationship with the government of Vietnam.

Furthermore, Vietnam should repeal all laws that deny freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. For example, the laws criminalizing “propaganda against the state” and “taking advantage of democratic freedoms to injure the national unity” must be abolished. I hope you will also make clear that the government needs to stop harassing and intimidating those who use the Internet to exercise their freedom of expression, such as pro-democracy bloggers.

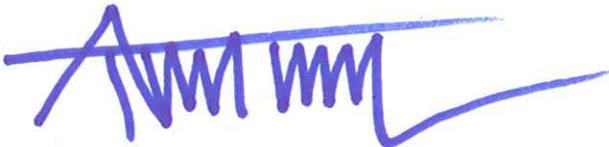
It is also essential that the Vietnamese government eliminate the requirement that all religious organizations submit to close supervision by the government as a precondition for worship services. Freedom of religion is a basic human right and no government should be able to impede on religious communities in this way.

Finally, the Vietnamese government should address the claims for compensation made by U.S. citizens whose property has been illegally confiscated. This practice is ongoing and it is time the government commits to a process to resolve such disputes.

In order to demonstrate U.S. support for Vietnam’s civil society and to actively engage the Vietnamese people outside of the government, I encourage you to meet with leaders of independent and unrecognized religious communities, human rights activists, pro-democracy advocates and political dissidents. Their stories deserve to be heard and incorporated into the U.S. relationship with Vietnam. Throughout your trip I ask you illustrate to the Vietnamese authorities that expansion of the United States trade and security relationship with their government will not be acceptable to our government or to the American people unless it is contingent upon significant, measurable, and irreversible improvements in human rights practices.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ted Poe', with a stylized, wavy underline.

Ted Poe
Member of Congress