



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing
Human Rights: Taking Stock and Looking Forward

Thursday, December 8, 2016
3:30 – 5:00 PM
HVC-200 Capitol Visitor Center

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, I would first like to thank the Co-Chair, Congressman McGovern, and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for all their work setting up these two panels today.

I would also like to thank all the panelists for taking the time to join us, I know we have a very distinguished group here.

Four years ago I first introduced a resolution commemorating Human Rights Day and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I have continued to do that each December since 2013.

As we enter the end of the year and begin to take stock of what we've done and where we've gone, I believe there is no more opportune time to reflect on the state of human rights around the world.

From the plight of the Rohingya in Burma to the ongoing international refugee crisis I think we can all agree that we will have a tough year ahead of us.

In all corners of the globe, we have seen a proliferation of human rights abuses this year that show no signs of abating any time soon.

In Vietnam, we have a repressive regime that cracks down on all forms of dissent against its rule. A recent law passed by the Vietnamese government to further regulate religious practice has been heavily criticized by faith-based groups and religious institutions from across the spectrum as restricting religious freedom for millions of Vietnamese.

Nearby in Cambodia, I have been encouraged and inspired by the efforts of the political opposition to speak out against the government. I had a chance this morning to speak with one of the opposition's leaders, Mr. Kem Sokha, who was just recently released from effective house arrest that had dragged on for months because of trumped up criminal charges leveled by the government. Elections in this coming year and in 2018 will be closely scrutinized to see if the ruling party continues its record of fostering a closed and unfair political environment.

LGBT people around the globe continue to bravely voice their demand for equal rights, while facing extreme violence and discrimination.

My hope is that this coming year we will continue to shine a light on human rights abuses all around the globe. All of us—Members of Congress, the Administration, advocacy groups, and even ordinary citizens—have a responsibility to speak out when we see wrongdoing.

Through my work with the Commission, I have seen firsthand how important it is to continue our advocacy.

In my first year in Congress, I adopted the case of Vietnamese blogger Nguyen Tien Trung through the Commission's Defending Freedoms Project. Trung was a passionate advocate for democracy and free expression who was convicted for allegedly attempting to "overthrow the government."

I am happy to report that a consistent pressure campaign from Vietnamese citizens and the international community won Trung's release in 2014.

However, Trung remains under house arrest, while hundreds of other prisoners of conscience remain behind bars in Vietnam.

I have since taken up the cause of Nguyen Cong Chinh, a Lutheran pastor jailed for his religious beliefs, and Nguyen Van Dai, a renowned human rights lawyer also jailed for speaking out against the government.

I know that in this coming year, I will not be silent on these issues, and I urge all of you to join in the hard work of defending human rights around the world.