



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Persecution of Religious and Indigenous Communities in Vietnam

**JPM Opening Remarks
Wednesday, March 26, 2014
2:00 PM - 4:00 PM
HVC 210**

Good Morning. Thank you for attending today's hearing on the *Persecution of Religious and Indigenous Communities in Vietnam*. I would like to extend a special welcome to the panelists – I admire your courage and dedication and I thank you for your time, passion, and work on human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam. I would also like to thank the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, especially Elise Ho, for organizing this important hearing and my colleague Frank Wolf for spearheading this initiative.

The human rights situation in Vietnam has deteriorated since the last time the Commission met to discuss it in 2012, especially as Vietnam struggles with economic and political stagnation. Public discontent and critical commentary have grown, fueled by the lack of basic freedoms and growing corruption, and the Vietnamese government's increased efforts to silence critical voices with a heavy hand. Many peaceful activists received long prison terms for exposing government corruption, protesting expropriation of lands, and calling for freedom and dignity for all in Vietnam, regardless of their ethnic origin or religious affiliation. We saw family members of several of these prisoners at the Commission's hearing on prisoners of conscience in January. They pleaded with us to help raise awareness of the unjust and, often, inhumane treatment of their loved ones, whose only crime was to stand up peacefully for their basic human rights. Despite this persecution, voices of dissent continue to rise, and in the last year we saw several large-scale petitions calling for the widening of Vietnam's political space and greater protection for freedom of expression.

Regrettably, the Vietnamese government continues to severely restrict the freedom of its citizens to practice religion. Religious groups in Vietnam endure rigid control by the government and face violent crackdown for operating outside of government-controlled and government-registered institutions. A government decree signed in 2013 banned all religious, cultural, and traditional activities – even when conducted in private homes – unless they are registered, pre-approved, or officiated by a government entity. Many of the currently imprisoned activists were detained because of their religious activities; among them are people of different religions and denominations: Buddhists, Cao Dai, Catholics, Protestants, and others.

The government's low tolerance for differences also affects Vietnam's ethnic minorities, which, in fact, account for the majority of the population in the Central and Northwest Highlands, and along portions of the Mekong Delta in the south. Under the government's restrictive approach, many of these groups no longer enjoy self-rule and self-governance, and are heavily persecuted when they dare to stand up for their freedoms of expression, assembly, and tribal representation. Victims of discrimination and harassment due to their ethnic and religious minority status, ethnic minorities in Vietnam are particularly vulnerable to land grabs and exploitation. Sadly, the government's policies of assimilation, forced resettlement, state-appropriation of land, and population displacement have severely depleted these groups' cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage.

While the human rights situation in Vietnam is currently rather bleak, some positive steps offer, perhaps, a glimmer of hope. For example, in 2013, Vietnam signed the UN Convention Against Torture and issued a decree ending administrative sanctions for same-sex wedding ceremonies. My hope is that these positive tendencies will become a trend and a year from now we will meet to discuss Vietnam's opening space for all of its citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin, religion, or political past.