

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to today's hearing hosted by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the issue of prisoners of conscience.

Since the launch of the Defending Freedom Project in 2012, Members of Congress has advocated on behalf of prisoners of conscience to bring awareness to human right abuses around the world.

Many of these prisoners are jailed for their pro-democracy activism or for speaking against unjust laws within their country

The work of the Defending Freedom Project has been crucial in saving lives. We've had many successes and I am glad to say that two of my former prisoners of conscience have been released.

Most recently, Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, a long time pro-democracy activist, was released last year through collective efforts by Members of Congress and the U.S. State Department. I adopted Pastor Chinh as my prisoner of conscience in 2014. In exercising his religious freedom, Pastor Chinh was sentenced to 11 years in prison under false charges of "undermining national solidarity." In prison, he was physically and verbally abused by the authorities and was denied medical treatment. His wife and their five children were constantly harassed, monitored, and sometime violently attacked by plain-clothed public security forces.

The Vietnamese government released Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh on the condition that he immediately leave the country in exile. Pastor Chinh and his family now resides in the United States.

Although Pastor Chinh has been freed, other prisoners of conscience are often not so lucky. I also want to highlight the case of Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, the Supreme Patriarch of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

The Patriarch has been jailed numerous times for leading non-violent protests against the Vietnamese government calling for religious freedom. He is currently under house arrest in Vietnam. Most Venerable Thich Quang Do became a monk at the age of 14 and witnessed the execution of his religious master when he was 17. His master had simply helped to relieve victims of the grave famine in North Vietnam, but the Communists accused him of using religion as "opium of the people" and shot him dead.

I want to read a statement by Most Venerable Thich Quang Do.

Dear Congressman Lowenthal,

I am informed by the UBCV's International Spokesman, Mr. Vo Van Ai, that you will speak at a hearing in the US Congress on religious freedom and human rights in Vietnam.

I am happy to learn that the US Congress is concerned about human rights in my country. Recently, Vietnam has intensified repression against civil society activists,

religious followers and human rights defenders on an unprecedented scale. We Vietnamese are not afraid to speak out, and today many young people are using their blogs or staging demonstrations to demand respect of the environment, freedom of expression, association and religion. But our voices are weak, for the Vietnamese authorities use their massive police force, unfair judiciary system and vast network of prisons to stifle our legitimate appeals. This is why hearings in the US Congress are important, for they amplify the voices of all those who are putting their safety on the line to express their ideals and beliefs.

I speak as a victim, with firsthand experience of over three decades of repression. When I was just 19, I witnessed the summary execution of my Buddhist master in North Vietnam. After 1975, when Vietnam was united under communist rule, I was imprisoned, harassed, condemned to internal exile for 10 years, then imprisoned again, and finally placed under house arrest at the Thank Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon for the “crime” of launching an Appeal for Democracy in Vietnam. Since then, I have remained under house arrest without any due process of law. I am under constant police surveillance, my communications are monitored, and I am forbidden to travel. My letter to you today was sent through underground channels.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), of which I am the leader, is not recognized by the authorities, and our members suffer daily harassments, intimidation, repression, and detention. Vietnam has adopted a new Law on Belief and Religion which came into force this month, but the authorities continue to persecute independent religious communities such as the UBCV.

Today’s world is focused on business, trade, and development. But economic development is only sustainable if it is built on the foundations of democratic freedom and human rights. I urge you to do your utmost, in the halls of the US Congress and beyond, to speak out loud and clear in defense of democracy, and keep up the good fight to win freedom for all those who are deprived of their liberty simply for the peaceful exercise of their convictions and beliefs.

Yours sincerely,

*Sramana THICH QUANG DO
Fifth Supreme Patriarch
Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam*

Prisoners of conscience not only are persecuted for their religious beliefs, but often for defending human right abuses. My current prisoner of conscience, Nguyen Van Dai, is a Vietnamese human rights lawyer and blogger.

He has travelled throughout Vietnam to teach law students and train young human rights defenders on human rights reporting mechanisms and how to deal with police interrogation.

Dai has been tried for “conducting propaganda against the state,” sentenced to prison, and forced to close his offices. The Vietnamese government has denied Dai legal representation. January 2018, his wife visited him for the first time in 3 years. She reports that he does not look like he’s in good health. Dai also told her that he has almost never been allowed out of his cell during his entire time in jail since December 2015.

The work that advocates take on behalf of prisoners of conscience is important. From speaking out about these issues, to holding briefings or hearings, or even raising concerns to the country in which the prisoner is detained helps bring awareness about prisoners and open discussions about much needed reform.

Lastly, I want to read a testimony from another former prisoner of conscience of mine, Nguyen Tien Trung – a Vietnamese blogger and activist – who credits the work of the Tom Lantos Commission on his release.

Congressmen,

I am Nguyễn Tiến Trung from Saigon, Vietnam. In 2006, while studying in France, I founded the organization Viet Youth for Democracy and joined the Democratic Party of Vietnam. I also wrote many articles on BBC Vietnamese to advocate the democratization of my country.

After having come back to Vietnam in 2007, the communist government forced me to join the army on March 5th, 2008. It’s their way to restrict my movement, a kind of informal prison. As I refused to pledge allegiance to the Communist Party, I was expelled from the army on July 6th, 2009, then I was arrested on the very next day July 7th 2009.

I was sentenced to 7 years in jail, 3 years in probation for the charge of “taking activities aiming at overthrowing the people’s government”. Three of my colleagues were also convicted with this charge in the same case with me. They are Mr. Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức, Mr. Lê Công Định, and Mr. Lê Thăng Long.

It was an injustice for me as the freedom of expression, association, and assembly are of international standards of human rights. These rights are also recognized by the Communist Party of Vietnam in their self-imposed Constitution.

During my seemingly endless days in the communist prison, I had more strength to overcome the hardship because my relatives had informed me that the US Congress paid particular attention to my case. That’s why the prison guards treated me with leniency, and I was released earlier than expected, on April 12th, 2014 instead of July 7th, 2016. My three-year probation ended on April 12th, 2017, and I met Congressman Lowenthal in Saigon during this period.

I was lucky because Congressman Alan Lowenthal and other Congressmen always sought opportunities to speak out for my case. However, there are still many prisoners of conscience in Vietnam, including many of my colleagues. That’s why I am appealing to

Congress to continue your support for democratic activists and prisoners of conscience in Vietnam. Your support is precious to us and makes us mentally stronger.

I hope to study in the United States in one of these fields: Political science, Development Economics, Public policy, Public Management, or Constitutional law. I believe Vietnam in the post-communist era will be in dire need of experts in these fields. I hope that I may meet Members of the Tom Lantos Commission in the near future to express my profound gratitude toward the US Congress, and in particular Congressman Lowenthal.