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Religious Persecution Worsens in Vietnam
President Asked to Re-designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern

Excerpts by Rep. Chris Smith
December 15, 2010

In early July, Nam Nguyen, a Catholic from Con Dau was savagely beaten to death for his faith by Vietnamese police.

His brother, Tai Nguyen, testified at an August Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing that police repeatedly kicked his brother in the chest and back and his temples. "Blood," he said, "poured out of his nose and ears." Tai said his brother told his wife he couldn't handle the beatings any more. The wife seeing her husband's broken body kneeled in front of the police and begged them to stop. In response they punched and kicked him again, and again, and again, and Nam Nguyen died in his wife's arms.

What was Nam Nguyen's alleged crime?

His faith in Jesus Christ and his devotion to his Catholic parish.

The Catholic community in Con Dau, Da Nang Province, you see is in the process of being "confiscated" or stolen by Vietnamese authorities. The faithful are a ripe target for the atheistic government of Vietnam. The proximate cause for the crackdown and unspeakable violence was a May 4th funeral of an elderly woman and an attempt to bury her in the town's Catholic cemetery.

Nam Nguyen was a pallbearer when the police busted up the funeral procession of over 1,000 people, beating over 100 mourners, arresting dozens, and deliberately beating two pregnant women so as to kill their unborn babies.

The reign of terror on this 85-year-old Catholic community continues to this day—at least two remain in prison—and shows no signs of abating.

What happened in Con Dau isn't an isolated incident.

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010 Annual Report, “property disputes between the government and the Catholic Church continue to lead to harassment, property destruction, and violence, sometimes by ‘contract thugs’ hired by the government to break up peaceful prayer vigils.”

Now we know that includes funerals as well.

Other faith communities have seen a significant spike in harassment, persecution, confiscation and violence as well.

In 2005, I led a human rights mission to Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City. I met with almost 60 pastors, priests and leading Buddhists including the Venerable Thich Quang Do. I also met with Father Ly who was then under house arrest.

All expressed hope and varying degrees of optimism due to an apparent easing of religious persecution in Vietnam.

U.S. Ambassador at large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford, said promises of further reform were made and “deliverables”—concrete actions the Vietnamese Government said it would do—coupled with a major trade agreement led to lifting CPC. And you know what happened then?

Hanoi responded with a massive retaliation against both political and religious believers.

Signers of Bloc 8406—the magnificent human rights manifesto promoting respect for the rule of law and non-violence—parallels China’s Charter 08 and Czechoslovakia’s Charter 77—were hunted down and imprisoned.

Many religious believers who expected a thaw and reform and openness were arrested or rearrested and sent to prison.

Father Ly, a Catholic priest and prisoner of conscience, spent 17 years in jail for committing no crimes. After CPC was lifted, he was rearrested (in 2007), held in confinement and denied emergency medical attention. Look at this picture of him taken at his trial. Look at the animosity—the hate—on the face of the guards. Today he’s been released because of his deteriorating health but remains under house arrest.

Did CPC designation help mitigate religious persecution prior to being lifted? It appears so. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s report states that when Vietnam was designated a CPC in 2004 and 2005, “Hanoi released prisoners, expanded some legal protections for nationally recognized religious groups, prohibited the policy of forced renunciations of faith (which resulted in fewer forced renunciations), and expanded a zone of toleration for worship activities, particularly in urban areas.” CPC—and the penalties described by statute, the International Religious Freedom Act—has in the past and can be again a useful tool in promoting reform in Vietnam.

Congress, the President and all those who espouse fundamental human rights ought to be outraged at Vietnam's turn for the worse. We should stand with the oppressed, not the oppressor. President Obama should re-designate Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern for its egregious violations of religious freedom.