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*Religious Persecution Escalates in Vietnam*

**Investigate and Hold to Account Those  
Responsible for Murder and Other Human Rights  
Abuses of Catholics in Con Dau**

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Excerpts by Rep. Chris Smith

August 18, 2010

Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Wolf, for chairing this important hearing and special thanks to Anh “Joseph” Cao for suggesting that the Lantos Commission meet in an emergency session to voice our collective concern for the brutal murders and systematic mistreatment of Catholics in Con Dau. Thank you also to our distinguished witnesses for participating today; I look forward to your testimony.

This past Sunday, August 15, 2010, marked the 80th anniversary of the founding of Con Dau, a Catholic village in the Diocese of Da Nang, Central Vietnam. What should have been a joyous occasion has been marred by unspeakable violence. A few months ago during a religious funeral procession, Vietnamese authorities and riot police disrupted that sad and solemn occasion, shooting tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd, beating mourners with batons and electric rods. More than 100 were injured, dozens were arrested, and several remain in custody and have reportedly been severely beaten and tortured. At least two innocent people have been murdered by the Vietnamese police.

The Vietnamese government justifies this violence, torture and murder because the villagers of Con Dau had previously been ordered, some through coercion, to leave their village, property, church, century-old cemetery, their religious heritage, and to forgo equitable compensation in order to make way for a new 'green' resort. Nothing, however, not even governmental orders, grant license for government sanctioned murder and other human rights abuses.

As you will hear shortly from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), this is unfortunately not an isolated incident. In fact, according to the 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." In recent years, the Vietnamese government has stepped up its persecution of Catholic believers bulldozing churches, dismantling crucifixes, and wrecking havoc on peaceful prayer vigils.

Persecution of religious followers, however, is not limited to the Catholic Church in Vietnam.

In fact, I have here in my hand a list of nearly 300 Montagnard political and religious prisoners—men and women who over the last decade have protested the denial of their religious freedom and being driven off their land. The persecution of Montagnards, like Catholics, is ongoing. In January of this year, the government of Vietnam sentenced two Montagnard Christians to 9 and 12 years of imprisonment, respectively, for organizing a so-called "reactionary underground" network—this is how the Vietnamese government refers to a house church. These cruel sentences followed the arrests of dozens of Montagnards members of house churches who refused to join government-controlled churches. The arrests were accompanied by beatings and torture by electroshock devices.

We must not forget the sufferings of Khmer Krom Buddhists, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), and others. The sad reality is that the Vietnamese government persecutes any religious group that does not submit to government control.

While I am eager to listen to the testimony of the witnesses who are here, I am disappointed that the U.S. Department of State declined the invitation to testify. It was just a few weeks ago that Secretary Clinton met with officials in Hanoi and expressed concern over Vietnam's track record of human rights abuse and violations of religious freedom. I call on the Secretary to postpone indefinitely taking U.S.-Vietnam relations to the 'next level' until the Government of Vietnam can prove that they too are concerned about and willing to stop rampant abuse in their country and hold officials accountable for known or reported abuses.

I also respectfully ask Commissioner Van Der Meid, on behalf of the International Religious Freedom Commission, to visit Vietnam and report back to this Commission and to

Congress on the situation in Con Dau and the violence and harassment faced by Catholic villagers throughout the country.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to a resolution that Mr. Cao, Mr. Wolf and I introduced on July 29th to condemn and deplore the violence, threats, fines and harassment in Con Dau. Our legislation, H Res 1572, calls for the appointment of a United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Vietnam to investigate the ongoing and serious human rights violations in Vietnam, and urges the Government of Vietnam to permit the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom or Belief to investigate the events surrounding Con Dau and other similar situations in Vietnam. In addition, our resolution calls on the U.S. Embassy to visit the Con Dau residents still in prison, to continually raise this issue with Vietnamese authorities, and urges more State Department scrutiny in Vietnamese property disputes, particularly ones which involve religious communities.

In closing, I would like to mention the plight of Vietnamese refugees and asylum seekers flooding to the surrounding nations. In fact, many from Con Dau have fled to Thailand seeking relief from the persecution they face in their home village, and several hundred Khmer Krom asylum seekers are living in Thailand awaiting resettlement. It is important that the U.S. Embassy work in conjunction with UNHCR after an immediate registration, towards a swift resettlement of these and all asylum seekers.

Thank you again Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing.