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**“A Bad Year for Human Rights in Vietnam”**

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights,  
and International Organizations**

*Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Chairman  
Excerpts of Remarks  
June 7, 2018*

It has been a very bad year in Vietnam for human rights. Since the beginning of 2018 alone, the Vietnamese government has handed out sentences totaling over 100 years in prison and house arrest to human rights defenders and democracy advocates.

In the past year alone, 22 bloggers have been jailed as well as six members of the Brotherhood for Democracy. An outrageous 15-year sentence was given to Nguyen Van Dai, whose wife Vu Minh Khanh testified before this committee in 2016.

I was informed before the hearing by one of our witnesses Thang Nguyen that Nguyen Van Dai and his wife Vu Minh Khanh are on a plane right now to Germany. This is great news, Vietnam's loss is the World's gain.

I met Nguyen Van Dai in Hanoi in 2005 and Scott Flipse met him in Ba Sao prison in 2007 and 2009. We look forward to Mr. Dai testifying someday soon at this committee.

The Vietnamese government has gotten a free pass on human rights for too long.

There are currently 169 political and religious prisoners in Vietnam, including bloggers, labor union and democracy advocates, and religious leaders.

Freedom House rates Vietnam as “Not Free” and possessing of some of the world’s highest press and internet restrictions.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom again this year recommended that Vietnam be designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” for egregious religious freedom abuses.

U.S. policy has failed the Vietnamese people. This is a bipartisan criticism. We have enriched Vietnam’s Communist leaders and coddled their interests at the expense of the hopes and desires of the Vietnamese people of liberty and human rights.

The Trump Administration has an opportunity to bring about real reforms in Vietnam if tangible human rights improvements are linked to better U.S.-Vietnam relations.

The U.S. has leverage to encourage reform—Vietnam needs a strong U.S. partnership—particularly as China’s aggressiveness increases. The question is—will this leverage be used to help the people of Vietnam or their Communist rulers?

I have been to Vietnam. I have met with its rights advocates and young activists for decades now. The younger generation in Vietnam—66 percent of Vietnam is under the age of 40—looks to the U.S. as a land of opportunity and freedom.

This generation wants the same liberties enjoyed by their relatives in California, Texas, Virginia, Louisiana, New Jersey, and so many other places where former Vietnamese refugees have flourished.

They want to speak freely, blog freely, worship freely, and be free to choose and change their leaders.

Failing to press for concrete human rights improvements underestimates U.S. leverage and will disappoint the young generation in Vietnam who are that country’s dynamic future.

The President will face pressure from his advisors and the business community to look at Vietnam through the lens of trade deals and the containment of China. Hopefully, he will be able to see the situation more clearly than past Administrations.

I know there is great interest in the Pentagon about a partnership with Vietnam to oppose China’s aggressive South China Sea policy. The U.S. has an interest in free and open sea lanes.

But no government that represses its own people or restricts fundamental freedoms can be a trusted ally of the United States. No government that censors the Internet,

tortures and jails dissidents, and crushes civil society should be given generous trade or security benefits without conditions.

Robust championing of individual rights will meet with some success—if recent history is our guide.

The Vietnamese government has responded to concerns expressed by the last two Administrations when they linked human rights improvements to better U.S.-Vietnam relations.

Whether to gain entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or to address U.S. concerns over religious freedom abuses, the Vietnamese government took steps toward reform when pressed by past American Presidents.

It is when the U.S. loses interest in human rights that conditions regress—as it has in the past year.

The business of the Communist Party is staying in power and repressing those they believe will challenge their power. They will not embrace human rights improvements or the rule of law unless it is a firm condition of better relations with the U.S.

Putting human rights and the rule of law at the center of bilateral relations is the goal of H.R. 5621—the [\*Vietnam Human Rights Act\*](#)—bipartisan legislation that was introduced last month.

The bill emphasizes the connection between human rights improvements and U.S. interests and states that U.S. policy should prioritize the freedom of religion, freedom of the press, Internet Freedom, independent labor unions, the protection of women and girls from trafficking, and advances in the rule of law as critical components of both U.S.-Vietnam relations and any U.S. led effort to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Similar bills passed three times in the House with overwhelming margins, only to stall in the Senate.

U.S. policy must send the unmistakable message to the Government of Vietnam that human rights improvements are fundamental to better relations, critically linked to our mutual economic and security interests, and will not be ignored or bargained away.