

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on
“Spotlighting Human Rights in Southeast Asia”
July 9, 2014**

(As Prepared for Delivery)

This hearing on human rights in Southeast Asia will come to order. America’s commitment to protecting human dignity and justice abroad is unparalleled. This commitment—which has long enjoyed strong bipartisan support—is a key focus of this Committee. We have taken legislative action on human rights violations, including in Venezuela, Nigeria, North Korea, and the People’s Republic of China.

We are also working to strengthen the ability of the United States to promote human rights through international broadcasting. That is one of the reasons why the Committee passed legislation to overhaul our international broadcasters—so that they can better underscore a message of pluralism and tolerance.

Yesterday, the House passed legislation to reauthorize the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. As a body of experts who speak out on behalf of persecuted believers of any faith, the Commission helps to ensure that the U.S. stands up for what many consider the “first freedom.”

Unfortunately, when it comes to Southeast Asia—a strategically important region that is home to approximately 620 million people—the outlook for human rights is troubling.

In Vietnam, we have overwhelming evidence that the human rights situation is worsening with the government continuing its severe crackdown on critics of the regime. We know that the Government of Vietnam suppresses virtually all forms of dissent through intimidation, physical violence, and long prison terms. In my own travels to Vietnam, I have seen firsthand the lengths that the secret police will go to in order to stifle any form of free speech or religious freedom. Yet, despite 18 meetings of the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, there is no improvement in the human rights situation. I call on the Government of Vietnam to immediately cease its human rights abuses and release all political prisoners.

In Burma, the regime’s early progress on human rights has given way to worsening conditions for religious and ethnic minorities all over that country. The plight of the Rohingya Muslims is well documented thanks to groups such as United to End Genocide. The Government’s treatment of the Rohingya Muslims is beyond deplorable. Forced to live in concentration camps, the Rohingya are systematically deprived of access to healthcare and threatened with physical harm and death. The expulsion of Doctors Without Borders – the only group providing healthcare to the Rohingya – caused 150 people to die from otherwise curable diseases and conditions.

It is time that we take off the rose-colored glasses and see the situation in Burma for what it is. We cannot continue to lavish more incentives on that Government in hopes that it will one day do the right thing. That is why I repeatedly call on the Administration to work with this Committee to improve human rights in that country. We must immediately cease military-to-military cooperation with Burma until the systematic persecution of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities has ended.

Too often the Administration—like others before it—is more interested in not ruffling diplomatic feathers than carrying out the difficult but necessary task of pressing human rights. But human rights do not have to take a backseat to strategic considerations. The Administration must recognize that its “rebalance” to Asia will be unsustainable without improvements in this area. Countries that do not respect their citizens’ fundamental human rights will not and cannot be true and enduring partners. This isn’t to say that we must cut off all ties when human rights abuses occur. But it is imperative that we speak out. There is no excuse for silence.

Before I turn to the Ranking Member for his opening remarks, I want to take this opportunity to welcome Janet Nguyen, Supervisor of Orange County’s first district, to the Committee. Janet’s story is the story of millions of Vietnamese who fled their homeland in search of a life free from the horrific human rights abuses that we still see perpetrated today. Janet has come a long way from the dangerous journey that her family took on a 30-foot raft when she was just a small girl fleeing her war-ravaged homeland. Today, Janet is the highest ranking Vietnamese American to hold elected office in California. But just as important, Janet is a tireless advocate for the Vietnamese American community in Southern California and throughout the country.