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Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman**
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Hearing:
“Will President Obama Prioritize the Release of Prisoners of Conscience
in Vietnam?”
May 10, 2016

(As prepared for delivery)

Thank you, Chairman Smith, for calling this important hearing.

In just a few weeks, President Obama will travel to Vietnam. While maintaining peace in the South China Sea and improving trade ties is an important shared goal, the Administration must carefully take into account Vietnam’s human rights abuses as this relationship develops. Human rights must also be at the very top of the President’s agenda.

No matter how the Administration frames our relationship, Vietnam remains a one-party communist state with significant human rights abuses.

As we will hear today from the wife of imprisoned human rights lawyer and activist, Nguyen Van Dai, Vietnam has a long, long way to go. In December, Nguyen Van Dai was badly beaten by government thugs and taken into custody. Since that time, he’s been denied access to his lawyer or even his family. Sitting in solitary confinement, Nguyen’s condition is unknown, and Ms. Vu is rightly concerned.

Sadly, Nguyen Van Dai’s treatment is far from an isolated incident. According to Human Rights Watch, “police still frequently torture suspects to elicit confessions and sometimes use excessive force in responding to protests over evictions, land confiscation, and other social issues.” Last year, more than 40 bloggers and rights activists were beaten by plainclothes government agents. Not surprisingly, not one person was held responsible.

Vietnam’s penal code criminalizes criticism of the government and “abuse of democratic freedoms,” while other laws restrict freedom of religion and the media. Bloggers like Anh Ba Sam, Nguyen Thi Minh Thuy, and Nguyen Ngoc Gia remain in prison for their advocacy of human rights, imprisoned for “abusing the rights to freedom of democracy.” Not surprisingly, Vietnam ranks 175th out of 180 countries for press freedom, behind Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

Freedom of religion is also a significant concern in Vietnam, as the government continues to restrict religious practice through registration requirements, harassment, and surveillance. Branches of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao Buddhist church, and independent Catholics and Protestants are banned and face government harassment for their peaceful religious practice. The

Venerable Thich Quang Do, who both Chairman Smith and I have met with, has remained under house arrest since 1998 for his religious beliefs.

If the United States and Vietnam are to build a stronger relationship, the Vietnamese government must honor the basic human rights of the Vietnamese people, whether in freedom of speech, religion, or assembly. That's the message the President needs to send during his upcoming visit – I wrote to the President last week asking that he carry this message. We are all watching. The President's trip can't be a replay of his trip to Havana.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for calling this important and timely hearing.