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***U.S. Relations with Vietnam***

Chairman Steve Chabot (R-OH)  
Opening Statement

Today's hearing is particularly timely, not only because of yesterday's Advocacy day celebrating and recognizing the importance of Vietnamese-Americans as part of the greater fabric of this country, but also because the state of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship is at a critical juncture. Vietnam is a country that over the course of the past two decades has made great strides in reforming its economy and accelerating its growth. In 2018, Vietnam will be formally recognized as a market economy and by 2020, it hopes to reach industrialized country status. This is tremendous; especially since many of us here in this room remember the war-torn country it was some 38 years ago, including my colleague, our Ranking Member Mr. Faleomavaega, who served in that conflict.

In addition, the U.S. is now Vietnam's largest trading partner and one of its top foreign investors. And Vietnam's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations is considered a big step in recognizing Vietnam's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region, even if it is becoming more and more uncertain whether Hanoi can meet the agreement standards.

Nevertheless, economic relations seem to be one of the most important components driving the Administration's efforts to broaden engagement in other areas. It is unfortunate that USTR refused our invitation to join today's hearing because trade is a key aspect of this bilateral relationship, and many of that office's ongoing efforts are contingent upon progress on other issues, notably human rights. Hopefully our witnesses from the State Department can relay any concerns that we express this afternoon.

As we have witnessed Vietnam's economic role in Asia evolve, its overall strategic and geopolitical importance has grown in parallel. Vietnam's interest in forming closer ties with the U.S., in response to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, has commenced a new chapter in U.S.-Vietnam relations. At this critical stage, where the relationship faces an array of opportunities, there is also a long list of challenges that are hard to ignore, namely the entirety of Vietnam's human rights record.

Credible reports from organizations here in Washington, international advocacy groups, and people inside Vietnam indicate that the human rights abuses in Vietnam are continuing, have broadened, and are getting worse. Members of the Subcommittee staff visited Vietnam earlier this year to investigate the human rights conditions inside Vietnam, during which they heard directly from a variety of individuals who validated these concerns.

Just in the last few weeks, we have seen Vietnam's government crackdown on dissent by arresting blogger Truong Duy Nhat for allegedly "abusing democratic freedoms with acts against the state;" beating and detaining numerous people attending a human rights picnic on May 5 who gathered to peacefully discuss human rights issues at a park; detaining 20 individuals just this past weekend for protesting the recent ramming of a Vietnamese trawler by Chinese navy vessels; harshly sentencing two young Vietnamese bloggers last month; and preventing blogger and RSF/Google 2013 Netizen of the Year Huyhn Ngoc Chanh from traveling to the U.S.

These examples, I think, give us plenty of reasons to think that the number of religious leaders, bloggers, and politically active people being abused, harassed, detained, convicted and sent to jail for violations of Vietnam's authoritarian penal code are growing. So the question today, is whether Vietnam is doing enough to warrant the current level of assistance and cooperation that it receives from the U.S. Even the State Department's 2012 Human Rights Report paints a picture that this may not be acceptable.

As the human rights condition in Vietnam deteriorates, enhancing security cooperation and assistance becomes problematic. Why, then, does the Fiscal Year 2014 State Department budget request for Vietnam increase the levels of IMET and FMF assistance, while decreasing assistance in other areas? These increases need to be justified. Fundamentally, Vietnam disagrees with the basic definition of "human rights" and what it means to protect the basic rights of its people, so I consider it ever more difficult to verify that U.S. taxpayer dollars are being appropriately utilized in these areas.

I hope that today's witnesses will discuss the outcomes of the Human Rights Dialogue held in April and what promises or commitments, if any, Vietnam made. At the same time, I hope that you can elaborate on how the Administration is pressuring Vietnam to take action and detail what the Administration plans to do if human rights abuses continue at the current rate.

Lastly, I think it's important to emphasize that a successful and mutually beneficial U.S.-Vietnam relationship, across all issue areas, is really what most of us here, I believe, want to see. Until Vietnam implements the proper reforms and demonstrates its commitment to upholding the basic rights of its citizens, it will be difficult to justify enhancing our relationship further. For example, if and when TPP negotiations reach a final agreement, it must be approved by Congress, and Vietnam's participation will likely face considerable scrutiny because of the magnitude of its human rights abuses. This is a message that Vietnam must understand.