

Congressional Hearing on Human Rights Abuses by Vietnamese Authorities

June 17, 2015

Statement by Rev. Nguyen Manh Hung

Vietnam Interfaith Council & Cattle Shed Congregation (Mennonite Church of Vietnam)

Testimony delivered in translation

by Dan Hoang, spokesperson of Viet Tan

Greetings,

I am here today as part of a campaign for prisoners of conscience in Vietnam with my colleagues Mr. Truong Minh Tam, a former political prisoner, and Mr. Nguyen Van Loi, the father of political prisoner Nguyen Dang Minh Man.

I am a pastor of the Mennonite church and member of the Interfaith Council of Vietnam. My parishioners and supporters have been persecuted for expressing their faith.

Before this trip, I discovered that the Venerable Thich Khong Tanh's Lien Tri Pagoda was threatened by security police that after the TPP is approved, authorities will tear down the pagoda. This trip to America comes at a crucial moment because of the discussions on TPP and I hope to bring forth my experiences and perspectives on the conditions of religious freedom in Vietnam.

The experiences of the Cattle Shed Congregation serve as evidence of the Vietnamese Government's repression of religious groups that do not accept the state's interference in religious activities. We have 100 members and provide 5 classes for poor children. Because the Vietnamese Communist authorities do not want us to do charity work, they seized our land, forcing us to resort to setting up our place of worship in an abandoned cattle shed.

Over the past 8 years, since moving to the cattle shed, authorities have continually looked for ways to get rid of us. On one occasion, the Cattle Shed Congregation was organizing a ceremony and I was told that the security police had come to investigate. When I came downstairs to see what was going on, plainclothes police came up, grabbed my neck, and choked me down to the floor as the security police stepped over my body to enter the ceremony room and disband the event. On another occasion, plainclothes police came to my house and destroyed my property and threatened to kill me, my wife, and my son.

They use thugs or plain clothed police to brutalize our parishioners, including pastor Nguyen Hong Quang and have manipulated the law to imprison religious leaders such as Father Nguyen Van Ly, Pastor Duong Kim Khai, and Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh. In spite of these acts of terrorism on our spirits and well being, we keep moving forward.

The most pressing issues for those in our religious community are as follows:

- Cao Dai and Hoa Hao Buddhist groups suffer land grabs at religious sites such as Tuy An in Phu Yen, barring members from participating in a large ceremony.
- Catholic groups were banned from allowing bishop Hoang Duc Oanh to ordain seminarians. Authorities are preparing to seize 22 churches of ethnic minorities in Gia Lai, Kontum.

Another concern is the state's draft law on religion, which is an attempt to tighten control over the affairs of faith-based organizations and stifle religious freedom.

In order to address these issues, five major religious groups have come together to form the Interfaith Council of Vietnam. With our collective voice, we speak up for religious freedom and political prisoners, and engage in humanitarian efforts.

With the 20th anniversary of normalization between the US and Vietnam, the ongoing TPP negotiations, as well as General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to the US, I hope the members of the US Government will:

- Call for the release of prisoners of conscience, especially faith leaders such as Father Nguyen Van Ly, Reverend Duong Kim Khai, and Reverend Nguyen Cong Chinh.
- Urge the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi to regularly visit political prisoners. I'd like to request urgent attention for blogger Dang Xuan Dieu and photojournalist Nguyen Dang Minh Man held in Prison Camp 5 (Thanh Hoa province) and community organizer Ho Duc Hoa in Nam Ha Prison (Ha Nam province). They have been mistreated, placed in solitary confinement and, in the case of Ho Duc Hoa, denied the right to practice his Catholic faith in prison.
- Call on the Vietnamese government not to enact the draft law on religion.

Thank you for your time.