

Restrictions on and Repression of Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Statement of Pastor Rmah Loan

before

The House Foreign Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Hearing entitled “The President’s Visit to Vietnam: A Missed
Opportunity to Advance Human Rights” on June 22, 2016

The Honorable Christopher Smith
Distinguished members of Congress

My name is Loan Rmah. I was born on February 12, 1950 and has been a pastor for 44 years under the Southern Evangelist Church of Vietnam.

From 1967-1969, I assisted American Special Forces during the Vietnam War.

After the war I went to Biblical School in Ban Me Thuot to study theology.

I worked as a Pastor in residence for two years until I was detained by the Communist forces in 1975. I was imprisoned for eight years because of my Christian faith and my support to the United States armed forces.

After my release from prison I remained under house arrest until 1986.

In 1986 I was appointed by the SECV to be in charge of the Evangelical Church at Budak Village, where I remained until 2014. In 2014 I came to the United States for church-related business but then found out that I could return to Vietnam in safety. Now I am asking that this great nation to grant me asylum because if I return to Vietnam, I will be imprisoned again, tortured, and even killed.

Today I would like to tell you about my Church in Budak, Thuan An, DakMil, Daknong Province. This Church serves approximately 100,000 followers throughout Daknong Province. They include ethnic Bunong, Hmong, Giao, San chi, Nung, Tay and Kinh.

In 2007 Hanoi allowed our Congregation to build the church in Budak.

Even though we have a church, we do not have the freedom to practice our religion. The Vietnamese government controls the Executive Committee that leads the church. Anytime we want to hold elections of the Executive Committee, we have to inform the Sub-district, District and Daknong Province Police to request their permission. The Church must provide them the full names of all candidates for background check. To be eligible, a candidate must not have been in service of the South Vietnamese Government, or a member of the FULRO (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races) movement or any group deemed to be opposing the Hanoi Government. On election date, the government authority presides over the election process. The government authority also attends and observes all ordination ceremonies.

When the church wants to celebrate holidays such as Christmas or Easter, or offer wedding or funeral services, the Pastor must get prior permission from the authority and specify the day, time and duration of the services as well as the number of participants. The Pastor must provide the text of his sermon to the government seven days before the services for prior approval.

The government even controls the words that we can use in our sermons. It is forbidden to use words such as “devil” because in Vietnamese “ma quy” can be flipped around to spell as “My qua”, meaning that Americans coming back. For such an absurd reason, we may not mention “devil” in our sermons. Similarly, we may not say “The Christ is coming again” because the authority interprets that as meaning “Americans will return to Vietnam.” The Vietnamese government accuses Protestantism to be an American religion. Neither may we use the word “freedom” because the government believes that freedom refers to America as in the “land of the free”.

The authorities also send their operatives to come and monitor our religious services. At the start of the services, the program leader must recognize and give thanks to the Communist Party and government officials first. Then we can give thanks the Lord, the guests and the Church, in that order.

In 2014, my wife and I came to the United States at the invitation of a local church. Soon I received notices from fellow pastors in Vietnam advising me not to return because the authorities were investigating my children about our whereabouts. The authorities suspected that I had disclosed to the world the death by torture of a Hmong member of my Church.

In 2013, Hoang Van Ngai, a faithful and dedicate deacon at our church, was detained and beaten to death. The authorities ordered me to never mention this incident and threatened my life if I dare to defy their order. In 2014, news about Deacon Ngai’s death by torture became known to the world. The authorities suspected that I was the source of information. I was not.

Regardless, I return to Vietnam now, I will be detained, tortured, and likely killed the same way they killed Deacon Hoang Van Ngai.

It has not been easy on me and my wife because our children are left in Vietnam. I am applying for asylum in the United States but it could take years for my fate to be decided.

America is a land that was founded on religious freedom. Just like the immigrants and refugees from hundreds of years ago, I have reached the shores of America seeking safety and freedom.

I ask that you, as leaders of the United States, to never forget that millions of people around the world are suffering every day, all because of the God they believe in. I ask that you continue to protect them and also that you protect my wife and me so we do not face persecution in the hands of the Vietnamese authorities.

We believe President Obama and leaders of the free world must have a road map for peace, freedom and democracy for Vietnam. We must not allow the yoke of persecution imposed on Christians and followers of other faith to continue. We must stand with one voice, one heart and one task: Working together to defend the right to religious freedom for Montagnard Evangelical Christians and all Vietnamese citizens in Vietnam.

Thank you for the privilege to speak freely for the first time in the past 41 years. Thank you for remembering the Montagnard people and taking a stand for our survival.

May God bless you and the United States of America.