

**Testimony by  
John Hanford  
Ambassador-at-Large  
International Religious Freedom  
Department of State**

**Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs**

**Thursday, February 12, 2004**

**Trade and Human Rights: The Future of U.S.-Vietnamese Relations**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: let me begin by thanking you for holding this hearing. It is an honor for me to be here, and I am proud to represent the Department of State and President Bush in this regard. As my colleague Deputy Assistant Secretary Daley will share, relations between the United States and Vietnam in recent years have strengthened and improved in several important areas. And yet some significant issues remain. One of these is religious freedom, and today I will address some of the current conditions for religious believers in Vietnam, some of our efforts in this area, and some perspective on how this issue relates to overall trends in Vietnam and our bilateral relationship.

As Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs James Kelly noted last October, differences between our countries on human rights and religious freedom “have the potential to impede the forward momentum in our ties more than any other issue.” Our relationship with Vietnam will never develop to its full potential unless and until the Government of Vietnam protects and promotes fundamental human rights, including religious freedom, for its citizens. Conversely, if the Government of Vietnam were to take further steps to honor its international commitments and improve its respect for religious freedom, it would greatly benefit both the people of Vietnam and relations between our countries.

Vietnam has been one of my very highest priorities as Ambassador. I have traveled there twice myself, and my staff has also traveled there twice, with another visit planned in the coming weeks. We have worked with our Embassy staff in Vietnam to keep religious freedom at the forefront of our diplomatic interactions with the Government of Vietnam. I have also met on

numerous occasions here in Washington with senior Vietnamese officials. Each of these times, we have made quite clear to the Vietnamese Government that religious freedom is a top priority to us, that it is a signal issue in our bilateral relationship, and that the central Government must take responsibility for seeing that the abuses of religious believers and violations of religious freedom end.

Concern for religious freedom in Vietnam is of course not confined to my office. I have discussed the religious freedom problems in Vietnam with President Bush. Secretary Powell, Deputy Secretary Armitage, and other senior Administration officials have spoken frankly with Vietnamese leaders about the need to end religious freedom violations. The Administration is committed to ensuring that religious freedom is raised every time American and Vietnamese leaders interact. It is especially important that the U.S. Government speak with one strong voice on this issue.

We have also worked closely with numerous Congressional offices focused on human rights, religious freedom, and Vietnam. The attention paid by Congress has done much to gain the attention of the Vietnamese Government, and to make clear that this is a significant concern to many of the American people as well. Let me acknowledge especially, Mr. Chairman, the high priority and diligent efforts you have devoted to this issue, particularly the focus you gave to it on your trip to Vietnam last month. I know that this is also an issue that Chairman Lugar has worked on. I recall one case several years ago in which I watched him place a strategic phone call to Vietnam that resulted in a religious detainee being released.

Since religious freedom is recognized as a universal human right and a concern of the international community, we also have sought multilateral support by working with like-minded countries to press the Vietnamese on specific cases and issues of concern. The Department works with diplomatic representatives from other Western governments, to share insights and cooperate on promoting religious freedom in Vietnam. I applaud such initiatives in Congress as well, such as the visit made last year by U.S. Congressman Joseph Pitts and Lord David Alton of the British Parliament.

My staff and I also meet regularly with religious and human rights organizations focused on Vietnam. We continue to be impressed with the dedication, diligence, and care that many of them display, and often find them to be valuable sources of information and insight on Vietnam. I should

also mention our appreciation for much of the good work done by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) regarding Vietnam. Much of USCIRF's research and insights have been very valuable for informing our work on religious freedom.

On my most recent trip to Vietnam in October, I took the most "hands-on" approach I could. I engaged in lengthy, vigorous, and candid exchanges with many senior Vietnamese leaders, including the Deputy Prime Minister and officials in the Foreign Ministry, Public Security Ministry, National Assembly, Religious Affairs Bureau, and other Communist Party organizations. While we frequently disagreed, I appreciated the willingness of these Vietnamese officials to discuss religious freedom and listen to our concerns. Along with Ambassador Burghardt, I traveled to two provinces in the Central Highlands, which have been the sites of some of the most egregious reports of religious persecution we have received.

We had received numerous credible reports of hundreds of churches and home worship gatherings being forced to close or disband in the Central Highlands since 2001. I began by meeting with the provincial governors and other officials in each province. Despite their assurances to me that religious freedom violations were not occurring in their areas, it was readily apparent that some significant problem exist. Take, for example, the dramatic disparity between the number of Protestants and the number of registered churches in Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces. In Dak Lak, the provincial authorities told us that the province had 120,000 Protestants and two registered churches. When Ambassador Burghardt and I pointed out the problem that this dearth of churches posed for the vast majority of Protestant worshippers, the authorities rather insouciantly replied that the others could just worship with their immediate families in their own homes.

We knew that many other churches had requested registration, and asked about their prospects. The authorities gave us the rather circular response that these "churches" could not be registered until they had approved "pastors" and approved buildings, but the "pastors" and buildings could not be approved until they were registered with "churches." Gia Lai Province was similar, in conditions, problems, and the position of the authorities. Some 71,000 to 100,000 Protestants had only seven registered churches, despite consistent requests for more to be registered.

Vexing registration procedures are not the only problem facing these Protestants. It may illustrate the challenges facing many religious believers in Vietnam, but hardly tells the extent of their plight. I heard numerous firsthand and credible accounts of believers being pressured to renounce their faith, at times being physically beaten, detained or imprisoned, and being forbidden from gathering for worship. Nor are these reports confined only to the Central Highlands. We have also continued to receive similar accounts from the Northwest Highlands, of churches being closed and ethnic minority Protestants being beaten, imprisoned, or pressured to renounce their faith. Department officials also were told by provincial officials in Ha Giang Province that there are no Protestants in that Province and were then blocked from traveling to areas of the Province which have reported serious issues with local official persecution. We have even received credible reports of the deaths in custody of one Hmong Protestant leader in Lai Chau Province in July 2002, and another Hmong Protestant leader in Ha Giang Province in July 2003.

We have learned of some indications of possible positive developments. For example, on both of my trips to Vietnam, I presented lists of religious prisoners to government officials. We have received reports that a number of prisoners have been released and are attempting to verify their status. We are trying to confirm whether religious prisoners were released during the recent Tet prisoner amnesty. We have also received unconfirmed information indicating that the Government may be taking steps to register additional churches. We will investigate these reports and continue to monitor the situation closely. If true, these would be welcome steps.

I was pleased to learn of your recent visit in prison with the Catholic priest Father Nguyen Van Ly, Mr. Chairman. On my first trip to Vietnam in August, 2002, I had been given assurances that his 15-year prison sentence would soon be reduced. I was disappointed when last year his sentence was only reduced to 10 years. He should not be in jail. I and other senior U.S. officials have continued to raise his case on many occasions, as well as the sentences that had been handed down to his nephews and niece. During my recent visit, I was given assurances that his family members would be released. We were encouraged on November 28 when the Appeals Court reduced the sentences of the nephews and niece. We will continue to press for Father Ly's release from his unjust imprisonment, solely for the peaceful expression of his religious and political views.

The plight of the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) is another concern that we raise frequently, particularly the UBCV leadership and the pressures they face. Several times on my last trip, when I would ask about the harassment, restrictions, and detention of several UBCV leaders in September and October, Vietnamese officials told me that the monks had been detained for “possessing state secrets.” When I would ask with some incredulity what manner of “state secrets” a monk could possibly possess, I received the reply that “we do not know, because they are state secrets.” Such responses, and such conditions, are quite unfortunate, and reveal the significant restrictions faced by too many religious believers in Vietnam. We will continue to urge the Vietnamese Government to engage in discussions with the UBCV leadership on normalizing its status.

Vietnamese officials frequently pointed out to me the significant growth of religious practice and adherence in Vietnam in recent years, across a spectrum of faiths including Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, the Cao Dai, and the Hoa Hao. My staff and I did indeed observe flourishing religious activity in many places and in many faiths, and of course we regard the relative freedom these believers enjoy as a welcome development. But the presence of religious practice does not necessarily mean the presence of religious freedom. Many Vietnamese are free to practice their faith with few restrictions and no repercussions. But too many other Vietnamese people are not.

Our message to the Government of Vietnam has been clear and consistent. We appreciate and affirm the steps they have taken towards expanding freedom, both economic and religious. From allowing the growth of many religious groups, to permitting the opening of a Protestant seminary in Ho Chi Minh City last year, to the recognition of Cardinal Man as a new Cardinal in the Catholic Church, Vietnam has shown some signs of progress. Folk religion is also making a comeback. However, serious problems remain, and we have urged Vietnam to end its ongoing violations of religious freedom. If it does not, Vietnam has been cautioned repeatedly that it faces possible designation as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act. We are continuing to monitor the situation closely as we undertake the CPC review process.

Compared with some points in recent decades, when hundreds of religious leaders were imprisoned, others were executed, and much religious activity throughout the country was brutally suppressed, conditions for religious

believers in Vietnam have certainly improved. But significant problems remain, and there has been deterioration in some areas in recent years. We must cultivate and encourage the positive trends, while understanding that Vietnam stands at a proverbial crossroads, and it is incumbent on the leadership of Vietnam to decide to take their country on the path towards openness, prosperity, order, and liberty.

Many of Vietnam's leaders are quite mindful of their history, and their current challenges. Some described to me the relative unfamiliarity with which they regarded religious belief, and attempted to place the question of religious freedom in the context of an evolving communist state. These considerations are revealed by some of the Vietnamese Communist Party's activities last year. For example, the State Departments recent *Report to Congress on the Government of Vietnam's Progress Toward Improved Human Rights For the Period December 2002-December 2003* observed that "the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Plenum passed new resolutions on religion and ethnic minorities that acknowledge the need for the GVN and CPV to respect human rights and improve conditions for appropriate enforcement of the law. However, we question aspects of the Plenum's resolutions on religion, which seem to indicate an intention to further control religious organization and suppress unauthorized religious activities." [I would like to submit a copy of this report for the record.]

In discussing such matters with certain Vietnamese leaders, they often contend that some religions are "new" to Vietnam, and receive hostile treatment because they are unfamiliar. I usually reply that I do not find this argument persuasive, in part because these same faiths have been present in Vietnam longer than the Communist Party.

I understand that this hearing is addressing the matter of trade and human rights in Vietnam. Any visitor to Vietnam cannot help but be impressed, as I was, by the growing prosperity and thriving commercial sector in many urban areas. Deputy Assistant Secretary Daley will share some of the economic figures characterizing this burgeoning growth, and they are remarkable. Increased trade and economic expansion have certainly brought many benefits to Vietnam, and have the potential to bring much more good.

How does this relate to the questions of human rights, particularly religious freedom? As we contemplate Vietnam's current situation, I believe that a philosopher well known to you, Michael Novak, who is regarded as a subtle

and profound thinker on freedom and its many facets, might offer some insights. Describing what he calls the “ecology of liberty,” Novak has argued that a well-ordered society must stand on three pillars of freedom: “free in its polity, free in its economy, and free in the realm of conscience and inquiry.”

Vietnam continues to expand in the realm of economic freedom, and this is no small achievement. But expanding economic freedoms must be accompanied by expanding freedoms in other areas, religious freedom being a principal concern. We appreciate Vietnam’s desire to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). WTO membership requires adherence to rigorous provisions for economic standards and rule of law. We are encouraged at Vietnam’s stated intention to undertake these commitments. In a similar vein, we will continue to encourage Vietnam to uphold its international commitments on human rights and religious freedom, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Vietnam is a party.

Our challenge, and our intention, is to take a sophisticated, balanced approach that encourages the growth of freedom in its many dimensions while opposing threats to freedom and abuses of human rights. We must work to strengthen and encourage voices of reform and openness, while condemning actions of intolerance and repression.

I note that today is the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, and I would like to close with a quote from him that conveys well the place of human rights in American foreign policy. Lincoln insisted that the principles embodied in our Declaration of Independence ultimately promised “liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time.” And so it is with religious freedom. It is not the exclusive birthright of Americans, but a universal hope of all people, including the people of Vietnam.