

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

July 6, 2015

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama,

We are writing to urge you to make human rights gains a top priority in your upcoming meeting with Mr. Nguyen Phu Trong, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party. For twenty years, the United States government has cultivated a close relationship with the government of Vietnam. Yet Vietnam remains a one-party state which treats its own citizens – particularly those who share the U.S. commitment to freedom and democracy – in ways that systematically transgress the minimum standards expected of any government that wishes to be a member of the community of civilized nations.

As the United States government contemplates a comprehensive trade and security partnership with the government of Vietnam, we respectfully request that your Administration insist upon the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and other prisoners of conscience. This includes some 150 imprisoned religious, labor and political dissidents whose names have been compiled by human rights organizations, as well as hundreds of other indigenous peoples and those from ethnic minorities who are being held in remote areas of the country.

Also, please press the Vietnamese government to eliminate the onerous requirement that all religious organizations submit to pre-approval and rigorous government supervision as a prerequisite for religious activities. Decree 92, effective January 1, 2013, prohibits religious activities by churches and other institutions that are not registered and approved by the government. The draft law currently being considered in the Vietnamese National Assembly would further intimidate and restrict the formation of independent religious communities.

Furthermore, we are gravely concerned about all laws and administrative decrees that restrict freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Under the guise of laws criminalizing “propaganda against the state” and “taking advantage of democratic freedoms to injure the national unity,” pro-democracy bloggers and others who use the Internet to criticize the government are routinely abused, arrested, and imprisoned. In 2013, the Vietnamese Prime Minister issued an order (Decree 72) to further restrict Internet freedom. Transparency and the free flow of information are critical to genuinely free trade, and especially to ensuring that the benefits of expanded trade are not enjoyed exclusively by government officials and their cronies.

We remain deeply concerned that the Vietnamese government is systematically thwarting the development of civil society by prohibiting the establishment of genuinely independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Vietnam, the government has created dozens of so-called NGOs

that are exclusively controlled by the Communist Party. The "Fatherland Front" and the "Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations" (VUFO) are examples of umbrella organizations through which the Communist party controls these NGOs.

We also have serious concerns about respect for labor rights in Vietnam, and the inability of Vietnamese workers to form labor unions that are truly independent of the government and of the Communist Party. We believe that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) should incorporate strong monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms to ensure Vietnam's compliance with international standards on labor rights. To this end, we applaud the point you made at a recent speech in Beaverton, Oregon, that "if Vietnam or any of the other countries in this trade agreement don't meet these requirements, they'll face meaningful consequences."

Moreover, the Vietnamese government must end the practice of forced labor and prosecute officials of state-owned labor export companies involved in fraudulent recruitment and other practices that constitute or facilitate human trafficking. The Vietnamese government is squarely responsible for human trafficking and subjects hundreds of thousands of its citizens to forced labor in "rehabilitation" centers, detention centers, and prisons. Appallingly, it sends tens of thousands of its citizens into modern-day slavery in countries around the world, while punishing victims who speak out against these crimes.

Finally, we urge you to insist that the Vietnamese government agree to a mediation process to review claims for compensation made by U.S. citizens whose property has been confiscated. Since 1975, the Vietnamese government has illegally confiscated the property of many U.S. citizens. In 1995, under the Clinton Administration, the Vietnamese government paid \$208 million in compensation for confiscated properties to 200 Americans. However, Vietnam continues its practice of illegal confiscation of real and other property of Vietnamese-Americans.

The TPP is not just another trade agreement. As the name implies, it will send a message to the world that its members regard each other as trusted partners. TPP membership will inevitably be regarded as a badge of honor and a seal of approval from the United States. As such, TPP membership should not be blithely extended to governments that mock our most fundamental values. In negotiating with the Vietnamese government over possible TPP membership, we believe that United States should prioritize the human rights concerns outlined above.

As the United States and Vietnam mark 20 years of diplomatic relations and embark upon a further rapprochement, it is imperative that Mr. Nguyen Phu Trong understand that additional expansion of our trade and security relationship with the government of Vietnam must be contingent upon significant and lasting improvements in Vietnam's human rights practices.

Sincerely,



Jeff Fortenberry  
Member of Congress



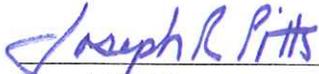
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