

June 23, 2008: Sanchez Urges Bush to Redesignate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Sanchez Urges Bush to Address Human Rights Conditions in Vietnam During Meeting with Vietnamese Prime Minister and Redesignate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC)

WASHINGTON, D.C. - In light of the upcoming visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to the White House, Rep. Loretta Sanchez, Co-chair of the Vietnam Caucus, issued a letter to President George W. Bush expressing her strong concerns regarding human rights conditions in Vietnam and strongly urging him to redesignate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

The United State Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that Vietnam be named a CPC every year since 2001. The State Department removed this CPC designation in November of 2006. Since then, the Commission has continued to recommend CPC status for Vietnam. Under the Bush Administration, Vietnam was accepted into the World Trade Organization, granted Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status and became a member of the UN Security Council.

The letter also expresses Sanchez's serious concern with the numerous "prisoners of concern" currently being held in Vietnam as well as the State's Department failure to acknowledge this problem. These detentions are in violation of international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Below is the full text of the letter. A PDF copy is also attached.

June 20, 2008

The Honorable George W. Bush

The President

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Bush:

In light of the upcoming visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to the White House, we write to express our strong concerns regarding human rights conditions in Vietnam. Despite Vietnam's claims to the contrary, human rights conditions have deteriorated in Vietnam since being granted permanent normal trade relations and ascension into the World Trade Organization in January of 2007. We hope that you will use Prime Minister Dung's visit as an opportunity to address these deteriorating conditions. We also strongly urge you to redesignate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that Vietnam be named a CPC every year since 2001. The State Department followed this recommendation in 2004 and 2005 but removed this CPC designation in November 2006. Since then, the Commission has continued to recommend CPC status for Vietnam. This designation was again recommended by the Commission in its May 2008 Annual Report:

The Commission maintains that the State Department's removal of the CPC designation for Vietnam in November 2006 was premature. In addition to the fact of ongoing religious freedom violations, removing the CPC designation suspended the diplomatic framework that had led to a productive bilateral engagement on religious freedom and other human rights concerns and therefore removed the potential incentives and leverage needed to urge the Vietnamese government to continue to improve its human rights record. Thus, in order to address Vietnam's persistent, severe religious freedom concerns and articulate fully to the Vietnamese government that religious freedom and related human rights are critical matters affecting bilateral relations, the Commission urges the U.S. government to re-designate Vietnam a CPC.

We are also very concerned about the numerous "prisoners of concern" currently being held in Vietnam as well as the State Department's failure to acknowledge this problem. In testimony before the United States Senate's Foreign Relations Committee in March 2008, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill stated that "all those individuals that the United States had identified as prisoners of concern for reasons connected to their faith" had been released by Vietnam and that for this and other reasons Vietnam "no longer qualifies as a severe violator of religious freedom." However, in its May 2008 Report, the Commission calls into question the State Department's rationale for this finding:

The Commission believes that the State Department's attempts to define religious prisoners as those arrested for "reasons connected to their faith" makes a too rigid distinction between "political" and "religious" activity not consistent with international human rights law. The Commission maintains that there may be scores of religious "prisoners of

concern," including well-known religious freedom advocates such as Fr. Nguyen Van Ly and Nguyen Van Dai; imprisoned members of Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Khmer Buddhist religious communities; and United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and Catholic religious leaders held under administrative detention, in violation of core human rights protections, including the freedom of religion. In many of the most recent cases, those detained organized or participated in peaceful demonstrations against religious freedom restrictions, monitored and publicized religious freedom abuses, or publicly called for legal or political reforms needed to guarantee religious freedom.

These detentions are in violation of international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Again, we hope that you will use Prime Minister Dung's upcoming visit as an opportunity to address the concerns we have described. We also strongly urge you to redesignate Vietnam as a CPC, as recommended by the Commission in its May 2008 report. United States interests in Vietnam should not be encompassed solely by trade, and we believe that the redesignation of Vietnam as a CPC will affirm our nation's role as an international protector of human rights.

Sincerely,

Zoe Lofgren

Member of Congress

Tom Davis

Member of Congress

Loretta Sanchez

Member of Congress

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

Member of Congress

James McGovern

Member of Congress

Frank Wolf

Member of Congress

Neil Abercrombie

Member of Congress

Edward Royce

Member of Congress

Maurice Hinchey

Member of Congress

Trent Franks

Member of Congress

Michael Honda

Member of Congress

Dana Rohrabacher

Member of Congress

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