

**An Open letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper
on the occasion of his trip to Vietnam to attend the APEC Summit
in November 2006**

October 20, 2006

Dear Mr. Prime Minister:

On behalf of all Vietnamese Canadians who yearn to see a free and democratic Vietnam, we are very pleased to learn that you will be going to Vietnam to attend the forthcoming Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO Summit 2006.

When arriving in Vietnam, you will see, in addition to the natural beauty of the country, many high-rise buildings and splendid mansions belonging to the elite of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and wealthy businessmen. However, you may not have the opportunity to see the abject poverty of the majority of the Vietnamese people who live in the countryside or in suburban areas. Nor will you see hordes of forlorn peasants who keep on coming to Hanoi year after year to protest in vain against the confiscation of their farmland.

Mr. Prime Minister:

The Vietnamese government will assure you and other APEC leaders that Vietnam is a democratic country. However, how can it be so if its citizens have no right to freely run in elections but are instead forced to vote for those who are chosen by the VCP? Since all candidates are thus arbitrarily nominated, from the People's Committee at the village level to the National Assembly, elections are only a ploy used by the regime to disguise its thinly veiled scheme to impose its will on the population. This is the reason why people's legitimate complaints are never addressed.

Vietnamese authorities keep on bragging that Vietnam currently has more than 600 newspapers, implying that its citizens have freedom of expression and freedom of the press. However, these publications are all owned and controlled by the VCP. Until now, no private newspaper has ever been allowed to appear. Recently, a group of political dissidents planned to start one called "Freedom and Democracy" on September 2, 2006, but only three days before this it was due to appear, its office was ransacked, its computers confiscated and its staff harshly interrogated by the security police. This shows that freedom of the press does not exist in Vietnam. Furthermore, Vietnam is considered one of the countries with the strictest control over public use of the Internet in the world.

Vietnamese authorities keep on boasting that people are free to attend prayer sessions at the places of worship. In reality, the religious organizations which were not established by the state such as the Unified Buddhist Church, the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, the Cao Dai Congregation, and the Mennonite Church of Vietnam are all prohibited from

operating freely. Many Buddhist monks and Christian priests are placed under “administrative restrictions,” i.e. under detention in their own pagodas or churches.

Recently, due to the pressure from Canada, the United States, the European Union, and other countries and international organizations, the Vietnamese government has released some prisoners of conscience. Nevertheless, hundreds of political dissidents are still detained or placed under “administrative restrictions” based on Decree 31-CP under which, for alleged security reasons, anyone can be detained up to three years without a court order.

Although Vietnam has made some economic progress over the last 20 years, politically it remains a backward country. As well, corruption has reached epidemic proportions, and permeates all echelons of Vietnamese society, from top to bottom. Corruption has deprived the Vietnamese people of the full benefit from the country’s economic development. It is an obstacle to economic liberalization and an impediment to international cooperation. Vietnam currently ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the Asia Pacific region and in the world. However, Vietnam’s anti-corruption measures often fail to expose and deter the main culprits, many of whom are high-ranking members of the VCP themselves.

The above situation shows that in many respects Vietnam’s political system remains an authoritarian one. The institutional basis for this regime’s abusive nature can be traced to Article 4 of Vietnam’s Constitution which gives absolute power to the VCP. It is this very one-party system which has caused countless sufferings to the Vietnamese people over the last six decades since the rise to power of the VCP in 1945. This is the reason why patriotic Vietnamese have steadfastly and continuously carried on a non-violent struggle to try to change the political system from a one-party dictatorship to a democratic, multi-party regime. Most well-known among the appeals of these democracy advocates are the “Call for Democracy for Vietnam” issued by the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in 2001, the “Nine Steps towards Democracy in Vietnam” by the Non-Violent Movement for Human Rights in 2005, the “Declaration for Democracy and Freedom” released on April 8, 2006 by 118 private citizens inside Vietnam, and most recently, the announcement of October 16, 2006 of the creation of a common front of numerous organizations and individuals in Vietnam called the Vietnamese Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights.

Mr. Prime Minister:

We hope that in your capacity as leader of one of the most respected peace-loving and democratic countries in the world, you will be able to use your forthcoming visit to persuade Vietnamese leaders to adopt genuine democratization of the political system as a top-priority national policy. In order to implement this policy, first and foremost they would have to discard the said Article 4 of the Vietnamese Constitution, repeal the 31-CP Decree, release all political dissidents currently detained in prisons or under house arrest, and move resolutely in restoring the freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom to form organizations and political parties, and freedom to stand for election.

Political liberalization and improved governance will greatly enhance and reinforce economic reforms. While relations with Vietnam hold enormous potential, Canada may not fully benefit from those relations until Vietnam becomes a truly free and democratic country.

With our best wishes for a successful trip, we remain,

Yours most respectfully,

Vietnamese Canadian Federation

World Vietnamese Buddhist Order

Alliance for Democracy in Vietnam

Vietnamese Human Rights Association of Ontario

Vietnam Reform Party

Democracy for Vietnam – Montreal Centre

Canada Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Assembly of Veterans of the Republic of Vietnam, Canada Coordination Centre

Vietnamese Physicians of the Free World