

**A Call for Respect of Human Rights and Democracy in Vietnam -
Open letter to Prime Minister Paul Martin
on the occasion of
the visit to Canada by Vietnam's Prime Minister Phan Van Khai**

Dear Mr. Prime Minister:

We understand that next week, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai of Vietnam will pay an official visit to Canada. Since this is the first time that a highest-level representative of the post-war Vietnamese Communist government will come here, we, Canadians of Vietnamese origin, earnestly hope that the Canadian government will use this opportunity to convey to him our serious concerns regarding the lack of freedom, respect of human rights, and democracy in Vietnam.

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the Vietnamese Communists have imposed a dictatorial regime on the whole country, with absolute power concentrated in the Communist Party of Vietnam. This is enshrined in Article 4 of the Vietnamese constitution adopted in 1992, which reads as follows:

The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, the faithful representative of the rights and interests of the working class, the toiling people, and the whole nation, acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh's thought, is the force leading the State and society.

In this state of affairs, as Lord Acton once observed, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Vietnam has become one of the most corrupt countries in the world, where human rights are subject to blatant abuses, and political dissidents are routinely and mercilessly persecuted. These facts have been well documented by such diverse international organizations as Transparency International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Borders, and the U.S. International Commission on Religious Freedom. The widespread corruption in Vietnam has resulted in abject poverty of the majority of the population while enriching the elite few, including a large number of Party members.

We would, therefore, like to bring to your attention the following issues for your meeting with Mr. Khai:

1. Democratic Reform

The primary obstacle on the road towards democracy in Vietnam is the aforementioned Article 4 of its constitution. Therefore, in order to carry out democratic reform, this self-serving and progress-blocking article should be abolished.

2. Freedom of Expression

There is no independent news media in Vietnam. Furthermore, the government regularly jams selective radio broadcasts from overseas such as the BBC, Radio France International, and Radio Free Asia, and uses firewalls to prevent public access to overseas Vietnamese websites deemed politically sensitive. Given that freedom of expression is one of the key elements of free and democratic countries, among which Canada occupies a prominent place, the Canadian government should urge Vietnam to stop these practices. In addition, Canada should demand that under the principle of reciprocity, as a condition of entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Vietnam allow unrestricted entry of cultural products from other countries.

3. Religious Freedom

Vietnamese authorities continue to subject religious organizations to maltreatment, harass their practitioners, and persecute their leaders.

Human Rights Watch, in its news bulletin of June 17, 2005, indicates that the government of Vietnam seeks to exercise control over virtually every aspect of religion, from the ordination of Catholic clergy to the prohibition of flood relief efforts by the non-government sanctioned Buddhist organization, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. In addition, it notes that despite the recent high-profile prisoner releases and new directives on religion, the government continues to arrest and imprison ethnic minority Christians in the northwestern provinces and Central Highlands and pressure them to recant their faith.

Canada should demand that the Vietnamese authorities stop this policy and immediately release the religious leaders who are currently imprisoned or under house arrest, including the Most Venerables Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do, and Thich Thien Minh of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam; Messrs. Tran Van Hoang and Bui Van Hue of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church; Reverends Nguyen Van Ly, Nguyen Huu Giai, and Pham Van Loi and Brother Nguyen Thien Phung of the Catholic Church; Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang, Evangelist Pham Ngoc Thach, and Ms. Le Thi Hong Lien of the Mennonite Church; Pastor Than Van Truong of the Vietnam Baptist General Conference; and Pastor Nguyen Lap Ma of the Christian Missionary Alliance.

4. Political Prisoners

Since 1975, many political dissidents in Vietnam have called for respect of human rights, freedom, and democracy. Instead of listening to their constructive and reasonable suggestions, the Vietnamese government has subjected them to various forms of harassment, including house arrest, detention without trial, and harsh imprisonment. This policy of suppressing dissenting political views is detrimental to the peaceful evolution of the political system of the country and is unacceptable in a civilized world. Canada should urge Vietnam to abolish it, and to release and stop harassing political dissidents such as Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, Professors Nguyen Dinh Huy and Nguyen Thanh Giang,

and Messrs. Hoang Minh Chinh, Pham Que Duong, Ha Sy Phu, Pham Hong Son, Nguyen Vu Binh, Nguyen Khac Toan, and Phuong Nam Do Nam Hai, among others.

5. Lack of Transparency in the Application of the Laws

Many overseas Vietnamese are unwilling to go back and work or start businesses in Vietnam due to the lack of transparency and to the arbitrariness in the application of the laws by the Vietnamese authorities. Canada should demand that the Vietnamese government take steps to remedy this situation.

6. National Reconciliation and Equal Treatment for All Citizens

Since taking over South Vietnam by force in 1975 in flagrant violation of the Paris Peace Accord of 1973 which they themselves signed, the Vietnamese Communists have subjected the people of South Vietnam to discriminatory treatment due to their association with the previous regime. Many of them have been treated as social outcasts and denied the rights enjoyed by ordinary citizens. This practice is widespread in all fields, including education, and economic and political activities.

The above situation stems basically from the refusal of the Vietnamese authorities to declare a policy of national reconciliation. Although they have called for national solidarity and cooperation, and openly advocated a policy of reconciliation with their former foreign enemies, including France and the United States, they have yet to embark upon reconciliation with their own compatriots in South Vietnam who either did not support them during the war or currently oppose their dictatorial rule.

So long as “national reconciliation” is not officially declared by the government, it is impossible for those who oppose the regime, including the Vietnamese who have sought refuge abroad, to join in a national effort of rebuilding and developing the country. While this process takes time, the Vietnamese government should at least show its goodwill and readiness to start it by taking the following concrete steps:

- i/ Apologizing for the death of thousands of former members of the government and armed forces of South Vietnam, and the harsh treatment of many others who were incarcerated in concentration camps disguised as “re-education camps”; for the death of hundreds of thousands of refugees at sea or on land, and the suffering of millions of those who were forced to flee the country after the war;
- ii/ Providing care to South Vietnamese veterans on the same basis as those who fought on the North Vietnamese side and allowing the restoration of the cemeteries of South Vietnamese soldiers that were razed in revenge at the end of the war; and
- iii/ Acknowledging that Article 4 of the current Vietnamese constitution is the major obstacle on the road to a free, democratic, and prosperous Vietnam and committing to abolish it.

Mr. Prime Minister:

Over the last three decades, Canada has provided invaluable aid to Vietnam. We all appreciate that. We feel, however, that the Canadian government could do more. In particular, it should use Mr. Khai's visit to express Canada's strong interest in seeing Vietnam move resolutely in promoting freedom, democracy, and respect of human rights, and in proclaiming a policy of national reconciliation so that all Vietnamese, both inside the country and overseas, can contribute to its reconstruction and development.

Yours sincerely,

***Vietnamese Canadian Federation
World Vietnamese Buddhist Order
Alliance for Democracy in Vietnam
Vietnamese Human Rights Association of Ontario
Democracy for Vietnam – Montreal Center
Viet Democracy Network
Vietnam Reform Party
Canadian Federation of Vietnamese Veterans
International Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam (Canada)***

Ottawa, June 23, 2005