

Vietnam and the G20 Meeting in Toronto

An Open Letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper

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June 23, 2010

Dear Prime Minister:

Later this month you will have the chance to meet the Vietnamese delegation to the G20 meeting in Toronto. We wish to provide you with some facts about Vietnam and to make some suggestions on how Canada can help Vietnam join the community of free, democratic countries.

Socio-Economic Standings

With abundant natural resources, a young and industrious work force, and beautiful scenery, Vietnam attracts a lot of foreign direct investment. This helped boost the country's per capita GDP from US\$402 in 2000 to US\$1,060 in 2009. Yet, Vietnam still has a long way to go to catch up with its neighbouring non-Communist countries such as Malaysia (US\$6,897), Thailand (US\$3,940), Indonesia (US\$2,329) and the Philippines (US\$1,746). The regime's motto "market economy with socialist orientation" is just an empty, self-inconsistent bravado.

In terms of the U.N.'s Human Development Index, which takes into consideration other factors besides per capita GDP such as life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate, and education Vietnam ranked in 2009 a rather low 116th among 182 countries evaluated. This came as no surprise since much of the real economic power in the country rests with those who have connections with the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the country legal system is far from being transparent, and corruption is rampant. Transparency International, a widely respected international organization dedicated to exposing corruption around the world, in 2009 ranked Vietnam 120th among 180 countries investigated.

Violations of Human Rights

Freedom House, an international non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of freedom around the world, summarized the situation in Vietnam in its 2010 Annual Report as follows:

"The state continued to seize land for development in 2009 despite the global economic downturn, and those who protested such moves were harshly punished. The authorities also displayed a growing intolerance for political dissent, cracking down on democracy activists and critical bloggers. In September (2009), a government ban on public criticism of the Communist Party of Vietnam took effect, leading to the closure of the country's only independent think tank."

In March 2010, due to international pressure, Vietnamese authorities temporarily released from prison Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly - one of the regime's fiercest opposition leaders - for medical treatment. Lawyer Le Thi Cong Nhan, a young activist who fearlessly demanded political reforms in the country despite being repeatedly harassed and then thrown in jail 3 years ago, was also released after serving her sentence.

There are other political dissidents who either remain under house arrest such as the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do of the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Church, or are still imprisoned such as former Army Lieutenant Colonel Tran Anh Kim, information technology specialist Nguyen Tien Trung, writer Tran Khai Thanh Thuy, lawyer Le Cong Dinh, businessmen Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, and Le Thang Long, blogger Nguyen Hoang Hai (Dieu Cay), and writer Pham Thanh Nghien, writer Nguyen Xuan Nghia, Professor Vu Hung, etc.

At the forum held by the Vietnamese Canadian Federation on the occasion of the Vietnam Day on Parliament Hill, April 28, 2010, Father Ly made – via telephone – an appeal to Canadian Parliamentarians for help in “pushing for the democratization of the political regime in Vietnam, specifically for the freedom of forming organizations and political parties; stopping Vietnamese authorities from arresting more democracy and peace advocates; and demanding the immediate and unconditional release of those democracy advocates who are being held in prisons in Vietnam.”

On her part, Lawyer Nhan asked for support in “our struggle for the freedom of press and freedom of information, the right to publish private newspapers, and against the government’s control of the internet.”

Despite the efforts made by the Canadian government in the last few years in training Vietnamese jurists and lawyers, it appears that this help did not bring the desired results at all.

Freedom House characterized the justice system in Vietnam as follows:

“Vietnam’s judiciary is subservient to the CPV, which controls courts at all levels. Defendants have a constitutional right to counsel, but lawyers are scarce and many are reluctant to take on human rights and other sensitive cases for fear of harassment and retribution by the state. Defence attorneys cannot call or question witnesses and are rarely permitted to request leniency for their clients. Police can hold individuals in administrative detention for up to two years on suspicion of threatening national security.”

Religious freedom is severely curtailed under Communist Vietnam.

In 2009 Vietnamese authorities confiscated the lands that belonged to the Catholic Church in Thai Ha near Hanoi and later bulldozed a sacred building belonging to the Tam Toa Church in Dong Hoi Province to make a public park.

In September, they sent the police to lock out the students of the catechism classes belonging to the Loan Ly Parish in Hue, Central Vietnam, in order to take over the school. Afterward, they forcibly expelled the monks and nuns of the Bat Nha Buddhist Temple in Lam Dong Province.

More recently, the Vietnamese government ordered the police to An Phu Hamlet in Hanoi to take down a Holy Cross that has been on top of a nearby hill for over 100 years. When the Dong Chiem parishioners in the area tried to protect the cross, they were savagely beaten back, and some of them were taken away.

The independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, in its report released on April 29, 2010, named Vietnam among 13 countries of particular concern on religious freedom violations.

Incidents of Internet Interference

According to a report by the BBC on March 31, 2010, Google said malicious software has been used to spy on tens of thousands of Vietnamese web users. The company said the cyber attacks appeared to target opponents of bauxite mining in Vietnam.

On June 10, 2010, Google criticized a regulation recently enacted in Vietnam that will require retail Internet locations to install a software that will likely “allow the Vietnamese government to block access to websites, as well as to track user activities.”

Environmental Issues

Despite widespread popular concerns on the impact of bauxite mining on the environment, including those from its own ranks, the Government of Vietnam went ahead to allow a major Chinese company to mine bauxite in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. This will lead to serious pollution of not only the lands in the region but also the Dong Nai River delta in South Vietnam, where millions of Vietnamese live.

Conclusion

Despite being invited to the G20 meeting, Vietnam is far from qualifying as a fully democratic and free country. As one of its major aid donors, Canada can help Vietnam a long way by taking the following actions:

- 1/ Demanding that Vietnam release all its political prisoners and initiate dialogue with them on how best to develop the country’s socio-economic and political systems;
- 2/ Reviewing Canada’s aid to Vietnam, especially in the training of Vietnamese jurists and lawyers, to ensure that public funds are effectively used; and
- 3/ Imposing the improvement of its human rights record, including the guarantee of freedom of information, religion, and assembly to Vietnamese citizens, as a primary condition of continuation of development aid.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Yours respectfully,

World Vietnamese Buddhist Order
Bloc 8406 - Overseas Office
World Free Vietnamese Physicians Association
Vietnamese Writers Abroad - P.E.N. Centre (Canada Chapter)
Canadian Committee in Support of Vietnamese Prisoners of Conscience
Comité Canadien de support à la Démocratie et Liberté Religieuse au Vietnam
Canada Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Committee to Support the Movement for Democracy in Vietnam
Vietnamese Writers in Exile Association
Vietnamese Physicians Association of Canada
Vietnamese Physicians Association of Ontario
Assembly of Veterans of the Republic of Vietnam - Canada Coordination Centre
Vietnamese Veterans Association of Canada - Montreal Region
Vietnamese Veterans Association of Ontario
Calgary Vietnamese Veterans Immigrants Aid Association
Former Thu Duc Reserve Officer Cadet Association of Ontario
Alliance for Democracy in Vietnam
Vietnam Reform Party
Vietnamese Canadian Federation

*Vietnamese Canadian Federation, 249 Rochester St., Ottawa, ON K1R 7M9 CANADA
www.vietfederation.ca, vietfederation@yahoo.ca*