

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS
AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

HEARING ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN VIETNAM

November 8, 1995

**OPENING STATEMENT OF
REPRESENTATIVE CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, Chairman**

Today our two subcommittees will jointly hear testimony about human rights in Vietnam. We will hear from the Administration, from human rights experts, and, most important, from some of the victims of human rights violations themselves.

In July President Clinton extended full diplomatic recognition to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Many of us believed at the time that recognition was extended too hastily and without sufficient consultation with the Congress. In the opinion of many observers, this move also threw away the last bargaining chip we had for making the Hanoi regime account for our POWs and MIAs, many of whom are still missing after twenty years.

It was also unclear whether the Administration had secured appropriate assurances from Hanoi with respect to the protection of human rights in Viet Nam. In the modern world, for a regime that has been denied recognition by the United

States of America to be granted such recognition is an important symbol of full admission to the community of civilized nations. Both the symbol and the substance for which it stands are tarnished when we exchange ambassadors with a government which then proves by its actions that it is not civilized at all. Many of us had hoped, therefore, that the Administration's sudden recognition of the Communist government in Hanoi meant that we had received reliable assurances that there would be immediate and substantial improvement in Hanoi's dismal human rights record.

It took only a few days to disabuse us of the notion that recognition by the United States would mean a kinder, gentler Vietnam. In the days immediately after the announcement, various high-ranking officials warned the Western press not to assume that diplomatic recognition would lead to changes in the situation of religious and political dissidents. These officials made it clear that they regarded United States interest in such matters as an unwarranted interference in their internal affairs --- that time-worn slogan of totalitarian governments everywhere.

Then, only a few days after Secretary of State Christopher traveled to Viet Nam to raise the flag over the new United States Embassy, the government of Vietnam proceeded with two separate political show trials of dissidents who were already in detention. One was a trial of six of the highest-ranking Buddhist

religious leaders in the country. The other trial involved nine pro-democracy activists, including two Vietnamese-Americans who are United States citizens and who had travelled to Vietnam, with government permission and with U.S. passports, for a conference on democracy and development.

At these trials, the regime -- to which the courts are subservient -- did not even take the usual precaution of trumping up ordinary criminal charges. The charges levelled against the defendants were nakedly political, such as "acting to overthrow the people's administration," "carrying out activities to sabotage the state policy," and "abusing democratic rights in order violate the interests of the state and mass organizations."

The Communist government of Vietnam appears to be saying loudly and clearly to the free world: We want your investment dollars, and we are willing to learn from your economic system; but your values of religious and political freedom are not welcome here.

At today's hearing we have several extraordinary witnesses. We are particularly fortunate to have Mr. Nguyen Tan Tri, a United States citizen who was imprisoned in Vietnam up until just this Sunday. We will also hear from Nguyen Chi Thien, a prominent Vietnamese poet who was also a political prisoner, and who arrived in the United States under the Orderly Departure

Program only a few days ago. And we will hear testimony from Mrs. Doan Viet Hoat, whose husband is perhaps the most well-known prisoner of conscience in Viet Nam today.

These victims of the Hanoi regime will tell us about the human cost of the regime's defiant attitude on human rights. We will also hear from experts on political and religious persecution in Vietnam, and from the State Department, which worked diligently to secure freedom for Nguyen Tan Tri and to gain consular access to him during his detention.

As we move toward further normalization of relations with Vietnam, even while the government there defies internationally accepted human rights standards, it is timely that these two subcommittees put on the record the real state of affairs in Vietnam. It is even more important that we begin to discuss prospects and strategies for improvement.