

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump,

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are writing to applaud your appointment of the Special Adviser to the President on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council, and to respectfully request your attention to the situation of religious minorities in Vietnam. The appointment reinforces your Administration's consistent message that religious freedom is a top priority in its foreign affairs policies. In that context, we would like to respectfully draw your attention to the plight of tens of thousands of Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the remote Northwestern and Central Highlands of Vietnam who have been pressured and persecuted for their faith. The 25th anniversary of normalized relations with Vietnam provides your Administration an important avenue for protecting the fundamental freedom of religious freedom.

President Trump, last year during the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, you met with a former prisoner of conscience in the Oval Office, Montagnard Pastor A Ga, who had been jailed and tortured by the Vietnamese government for his faith. During that meeting, you gave hope to thousands of prisoners of conscience who have been imprisoned because of their religious beliefs and free exercise. But even now, the Vietnamese government has imprisoned the man who took over the leadership of Pastor Ga's church, Pastor A Dao. We humbly ask you to use all available tools at your disposal to pressure the Vietnamese government to stop persecuting religious believers.

For decades, the Vietnamese Communist government has tried to suppress, if not exterminate, Christianity in relatively remote areas. The Montagnards who live primarily in the Central Highlands, not far from Laos, have been one such target. Many Montagnard communities first encountered Christianity and became Christians through the efforts of American missionaries in the 1960s. Since then, however, tens of thousands of Montagnard Christians have been forced to convert to a government-controlled denomination whose leadership is more loyal to the Communists than to God. Those Christians who have maintained independence and held on to their faith have been subjected to harassment, threats, detention, torture, denial of livelihood, and denial of basic citizens' rights.

In September 2019, the Vietnamese Public Security publicly denounced Montagnard Christians in Dak Lak Province who joined North Carolina-based Baptist Pastor Gene Lathan in a prayer service conducted at a private home earlier in July. Public Security officers used a video clip of this prayer service to summon participating Montagnard Christians for interrogation.

Police interrogators frequently use threats of long-term imprisonment and even death to coerce victims to sign pledges to leave their denomination and stop reporting violations to human rights organizations, foreign governments, and international bodies such as the United Nations. The interrogators frequently threaten victims with prosecution and imprisonment for "unauthorized religious activities." The government has sentenced some 60 Montagnard Christians to long-term imprisonment primarily because of their faith while justifying their sentences under the pretext of "national security" or "national unity."

Similarly, provincial authorities have taken increasingly brutal measures to stop the spread of Christianity among Hmong hill tribes in the Northwestern highlands of Vietnam. The Hmong began converting to Christianity over 30 years ago. They mainly reside in the mountainous regions of Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, and Ha Giang provinces. For the past two decades, provincial authorities throughout these provinces have attempted to stamp out Christianity among the Hmong by insisting that they either renounce their faith or flee. Many have fled to previously uninhabited lands, primarily in the Central Highlands, where they live in makeshift tents and work as seasonal farming laborers. They lack access to

clean water, health care, and basic necessities, a state of affairs that is especially dangerous during emergencies like the coronavirus pandemic. Others have fled the country to seek asylum.

Denial of “household registration” is a form of persecution that has been used frequently by provincial governments to force Hmong and Montagnard Christians to renounce their faith. Without registration documents, these Christians cannot get a citizenship ID card, own property, obtain legal employment, apply for a business license, open a bank account, receive public services, or even use the public library. Married couples may not obtain a marriage certificate, and their children may be denied a birth certificate. They are functionally stateless in their own country. Human rights organizations have documented at least ten thousand Hmong and Montagnard Christians who have been denied household registration.

For example, an estimated 97 families (totalling 521 individuals) in Subdivision 179, Lam Dong Province, have not been allowed household registration for the past ten years. Their multiple petitions for registration have been ignored by the responsible authorities. Many reports about their plight have been submitted by human rights organizations to various UN mandate holders, who have expressed concern with the government of Vietnam, but to no avail.

We humbly ask that your Administration raise these concerns with the government of Vietnam as its leaders are preparing to mark the 25th anniversary of normalized relations between Vietnam and the U.S. The government of Vietnam should ensure that provincial and local authorities:

- (1) cease their policies of forcing Hmong and Montagnard Christians to either renounce their faith or join a government-sanctioned church, and of denying citizenship IDs and household registrations as punitive measures against those who practice their faith;
- (2) issue birth certificates to all children bearing both parents' names, and facilitate their full access to education and benefits programs;
- (3) issue citizenship IDs to all eligible individuals without them, and household registrations to all eligible families without them; and
- (4) issue marriage certificates, backdating to the actual wedding date, to all eligible married couples that have been denied such certificates.

Under your leadership, the United States is leading the global movement to protect and promote religious freedom. Your recent speech at the United Nations General Assembly has laid the foundation for that global initiative. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s announcement of the International Religious Freedom Alliance demonstrates growing international support for your Administration’s focus on religious freedom.

We are confident that the Vietnamese leadership would pay utmost attention to your expressed concern and recommendations relating to the right to religious freedom of Hmong and Montagnard Christians in Vietnam.

Respectfully,

Dr. Thang D. Nguyen, Boat People SOS
Kelsey Zorzi, ADF International

ORGANIZATIONS

Association for Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Vietnam

Buddhist Solidarity Association

Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam

China Aid Association

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Con Dau Parishioners Association

European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom

Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam

International Christian Concern

Jubilee Campaign USA

Junior Sacerdotal Council of Cao Dai Religion

Popular Sacerdotal Council of Cao Dai Religion

Stichting Vietnam Human Rights Foundation

Vietnam Coalition Against Torture

Vietnamese Women for Human Rights

INDIVIDUALS

Pastor A Ga, Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ