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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN VIETNAM

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Vietnam remains a concern to the Canadian government and a negative factor in an otherwise improving bilateral relationship.

BACKGROUND

Vietnam remains one of the world's last communist states, currently undertaking sweeping economic but much more limited administrative and political reforms. The human rights situation has continued a trend of modest improvement over the last several years. As a result of the reform process, limited freedom of speech, religion and political discussion are now tolerated. Despite these modest positive trends, Vietnam's performance continues to be mixed and the human rights situation is far from satisfactory. The communist party is firmly committed to one-party rule and any questioning of its leading role is dealt with harshly. An extensive and pervasive security apparatus remains in place. Free and democratic elections have not yet been held in Vietnam, and are unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Vietnam promulgated a new constitution in 1992 which notes that "human rights in all aspects, political, civic, economic, cultural and social are respected". The constitution also guarantees the customary personal freedoms of speech, movement, association, belief and practice of religion, press, ownership of lawful income, and even the right of self-expression. The caveat, however, is that all of these freedoms must be practiced "in accordance with the law". This permits the incarceration of dissidents, for example, for openly advocating a multi-party system. The lack of an independent judiciary also limits the possibility of individuals from exercising these rights or challenging state contraventions of individual rights.

There are several prominent examples of human rights violations including Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, who has two brothers in Canada and relatives in the USA. As a result of his activities to promote fundamental political reform (and membership in Amnesty International), Dr. Que was sentenced in 1992 to 20 years in prison, which given his age amounts to a life sentence. A colleague, Doan Viet Hoat continues to languish in prison in a remote part of northern Vietnam, and there are serious concerns about his health.

Concern also continues about the incarceration of Buddhist monks and Catholic priests (several of whom are Canadian interest cases). A number of prominent writers, poets and journalists also remain imprisoned, which is a focus of attention of Amnesty International's Canadian section and PEN International.

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