



**Vietnam Committee on Human Rights**

*&*

**Hudson Institute**

*Welcome you to the Conference on:*

**“Religious Freedom in Vietnam:  
Its Importance for Regional and Global Security”**

**Monday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

**12.00pm to 4.00pm**

**at the Hudson Institute**

**Stern Policy Center**

**1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Suite 400**

**Washington, DC 20004**



# Programme

11.30 – 12.00 pm  
Registration and Lunch



12.00pm  
Opening remarks  
**Vo Van Ai,**  
President, Vietnam Committee on Human Rights



12.10 – 1.00pm

## **Panel 1: Religious Freedom and American Policy in the Next Administration**

### Speakers:

#### **Elliott Abrams**

Former Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and  
former Deputy National Security Adviser

#### **Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz**

Executive Director, Becket Fund for Religious Liberty,  
Commissioner, US Commission on International  
Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

### Moderator:

#### **Nina Shea**

Director, Center for Religious Freedom, Hudson Institute

1.00pm– 2.00pm:

**Panel II : Violations of Religious Freedom in Vietnam:  
Testimonies from the Communities**

*Vietnam's "non-recognized" religions:  
the case of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam*

**Vo Tran Nhat**, Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

*Systematic suppression of independent Montagnard churches  
in the Central Highlands*

**Sara Colm**, independent researcher

*Restrictions and repression:  
the situation of the Hmong People in Vietnam*

**Tong C. Vang**, Director, South East Asia Monitor  
for Justice and Human Rights

*Khmer Krom Buddhism – religion and culture under threat*

**Venerable Kim Muol**, Buddhist monk, former political prisoner  
**Prak Sereivuth**, Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation

Moderator:

**Penelope Faulkner**

Vietnam Committee on Human Rights



*2.00pm-4.00pm:*

Roundtable session on strategies and best practices for inter-faith coalition building to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam and South East Asia

## Concept Note

Vietnam is home to a wide diversity of religions. A majority Buddhist country, it also has Asia's second-largest Catholic population, a fast-growing Protestant community, indigenous religions such as Cao Dai and Hoa Hao and religious minorities including Khmer Krom Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Bahá'í. Throughout history, religions have played an active role in all aspects of the nation's life. This is particularly exemplified with the Buddhists, who have a tradition of independence and social engagement unique in South-East Asia.

Today, in Vietnam's one-Party state, religious organizations and leaders continue to assume this crucial role, in addition to their activities in purely religious and spiritual matters. In the absence of opposition parties, a free press, independent trade unions and NGOs, the religious movements are essential voices of civil society, putting forth the people's grievances and pressing for social and political reforms. Largely as a result, they are subjected to persecution in every form. Hanoi has set up "state-sanctioned" Churches under Communist Party control. It imposes a draconian system of registration, and a system of police enforcement that includes the intimidation, brutality and detention of religious followers with impunity. A new Law on Belief and Religion will soon be adopted that further restricts the right to freedom of religion or belief. Yet this ongoing repression finds little notice in the international press.

Why should this matter to Western democracies? The US has been a leader in the movement for international religious freedom. With the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, religious freedom for all groups became an institutionalized component of US foreign policy.

The European Union is following with the adoption of EU Guidelines on the Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (2013) and the appointment in April 2016 of a Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union. Efforts for increased transatlantic and global cooperation are underway to advance this basic freedom worldwide.

US foreign policy is deepening its engagement in Asia. President Obama's "redressment to Asia" aims to strengthen the US presence in a region overshadowed by an expanding China. With its allies, the US has the vision and capacity to counterbalance Beijing's advancement and maintain peace and security in the region. A freer, more democratic Vietnam would be a vital ally for the US, yet Hanoi's newly appointed leadership is hardline and pro-Chinese. In April, the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that Vietnam be included on the U.S. official listing of "countries of particular concern" for its record of religious persecution. In spite of this, President Obama visited Vietnam last May and lifted the U.S. arms embargo without securing any concessions for religious groups or their members. Will the next administration continue this trend or pursue policies that encourage meaningful reform?

The Conference aims to give voice to Vietnam's persecuted religious communities; survey the current violations of religious freedom in Vietnam; explore policy options to promote religious freedom and develop a civic culture of tolerance and compassion; help lay the foundations of lasting peace in this region and in the world.

## Speakers



**Elliott Abrams** is a former Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and former Deputy National Security Advisor for Global Democracy Strategy. He was Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from 2000-2001, and Commissioner from 2012-2014. He is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, DC, and teaches U.S. foreign policy at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. He is a board member of the National Endowment for Democracy.



**Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz** has been Director of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty since 2010. She is a former advisor to the U.S. delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva and worked on raising awareness of the plight of political prisoners in Cuba with former political prisoner Armando Valladares. She is an expert on religious liberty issues, and has written numerous articles, spoken at conferences and appeared on multiple television and radio programs. In 2016, she was appointed Commissioner of the USCIRF.



**Nina Shea** is Director of the Hudson Institute Center for Religious Freedom. As a lawyer, she focused on religious freedom in American foreign policy for thirty years. She founded the Center for Religious Freedom in 1986, and was amongst the first to document violations of religious freedom in China and Vietnam. She served as Commissioner on the USCIRF for thirteen years, and was a leading advocate in movements to pass the US International Religious Freedom Act in 1998. She has authored several books on persecution in the Middle East, and currently leads a campaign for Christians threatened with genocide by ISIS.



**Vo Van Ai** is founder and President of the Paris-based Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) and Quê Me: Action for Democracy in Vietnam. He is also Director of the International Buddhist Information Bureau, and international spokesman of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). A well-known writer, scholar and poet, author of 17 books on Vietnamese history, culture and Buddhism, Vo Van Ai also testifies at the UN Human Rights Council, US Congress, European Parliament and other international forums on human rights, religious freedom and democracy in Vietnam.



**Sara Colm** is a specialist on human rights issues in Vietnam and Cambodia with more than 20 years' experience in Southeast Asia. From 1992-2011 she was based in Cambodia, where she served as a human rights monitor for the UN peacekeeping mission, advisor to Cambodian and international rights organizations, and senior researcher for Human Rights Watch. She currently works as a consultant for international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and the Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam.



**Vo Tran Nhat** is Executive Secretary of the VCHR. He speaks regularly at the UN Human Rights Council and at conferences on religious freedom and human rights in Asia and Europe. He has written reports on the legal system in Vietnam, prison conditions, freedom of expression and religion, as well as articles in the French and international press (*Mediapart*, *Droit et soin contre les violences*). Nhat is in charge of the religious freedom project at the VCHR. He has a Master's degree in Public Law and a post-graduate diploma in European Law (Paris XII University).



**Tong C. Vang** is a consultant with portfolios in human rights and security services. He is Director of the South East Asia Monitor for Justice and Human Rights, and campaigns actively to defend the rights of Hmong people in Vietnam and elsewhere. A former Lt. Colonel in the US Army, he had management responsibilities over humanitarian assistance, education, maritime security and peacekeeping operations. Tong Vang holds an M.A. degree in Literature from Northwestern University, Evanston, IL and a M.A. degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI.

**Venerable Kim Muol** is a Khmer-Krom Buddhist monk and former political prisoner. He participated in a peaceful protest to demand religious freedom in February 2007. He was arrested, defrocked, and sentenced to two years in prison in Vietnam.

**Mr. Prak Sereivuth** is Vice President of the Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation. He has been advocating fundamental rights and religious freedom for the voiceless Khmer-Krom people in the Mekong Delta for decades.



**Penelope Faulkner** is Vice-President of the VCHR. She is a writer and radio journalist, broadcasting both in English and Vietnamese. A specialist in Vietnamese current affairs, human rights and religious freedom issues, she has authored numerous reports on legal reforms, minority rights, religious freedom, women's rights and Internet freedom in Vietnam. A member of the Brussels-based European Platform on Religious Discrimination and Intolerance (EPRID), she has given training to EU diplomats on freedom of religion and belief.

**Vietnam Committee on Human Rights**  
**BP 60063, 94472 Boissy St Leger Cedex, France**  
**Website: [www.queme.net](http://www.queme.net)**  
**Email: [vietnam.committee@gmail.com](mailto:vietnam.committee@gmail.com)**