

AP: Vietnam Paper Blasts U.S. Hearing On Religious Freedom

WASHINGTON, February 14, 2001 (AP) -The U.S. government should press for an end to religious persecution in Vietnam as it moves toward a greater trade relationship with the Southeast Asian nation, religious leaders said Tuesday. Even before they spoke they were blasted by the ruling party newspaper in Hanoi for attending the congressional hearing.

"Religious freedom ... has been and is still seriously violated by the Communist regime in Vietnam against all believers," said the Rev. John Tran Cong Nghi of the U.S. Roman Catholic association VietCatholic Network.

"There is no religious freedom," he said.

Tran joined a Buddhist and analysts from Washington think tanks in testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a two-year-old government panel charged with monitoring and promoting religious freedom around the world.

The U.S. Congress this year is expected to consider ratifying a bilateral trade agreement signed last year and considered the last major step in the process of normalizing relations, a process begun in 1995 with the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two former foes.

"I ... believe that pressure for human rights and democracy must be an integral part of the U.S. trade relationship with Vietnam," said Vo Van Ai, director of the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau, a service of the Buddhist church in Vietnam.

"The benefits of bilateral trade should not be given free, and Vietnam must be made to earn them by respecting its citizens' rights."

He and other panelists testified to a litany of government repression, saying it imprisons and detains clergymen, forbids them from traveling through the country and from distributing church publications and it confiscates church property, among other things.

Earlier Tuesday, an editorial in the Communist Party daily Nhan Dan, dismissed the witnesses as a minority and their testimony as unwarranted.

"Those who clearly understand the religious situation in Vietnam consider them a

dissonant voice, which some hostile forces tried to create to distort and tarnish the bright image of Vietnam," said the Nhan Dan editorial.

Demanding an immediate stop to "*brazen interference into Vietnam's sovereign and internal affairs,*" Vietnam warned that those who abuse the religious issue "*have been and will be criticized.*"

The U.S. commission was also hearing testimony on Indonesia in what was likely its final hearing before it submits an annual report on its findings May 1.

The focus on Vietnam's treatment of religious freedom comes as Hanoi struggles to recover from large-scale civil unrest in Vietnam's central highlands two weeks ago.

Protests drawing thousands of ethnic minority members were triggered by the arrest of two activists working for indigenous and religious rights, and further fueled by lingering grievances over land seizures and religious repression.