

Vietnam Committee on Human Rights & Rafto Foundation : Letter to U.S. President Barack Obama



New York, Washington, London, Paris, Stockholm, Bergen, Prague,
12th November 2015

Dear President Obama,

We, the undersigned, academics, legislators, artists, religious leaders, members of international institutions and civil society organisations worldwide, believe in the power of dialogue and engagement, and we welcome the United States' strengthened relationship with Vietnam. However, we are equally convinced that this relationship is only sustainable if it is founded on the mutual respect of democratic freedoms and internationally-recognised human rights.

You will soon make a landmark trip to Southeast Asia to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit and the U.S.-ASEAN and East Asia Summits, where you will meet with Vietnamese leaders. This year is highly symbolic for your two nations, marking the 20 years of US-Vietnam diplomatic relations and the 40th Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.

As you know, the very word Vietnam evokes a multitude of contrasting and conflicting images in people's minds, and your visit will surely not escape this debate. For many, it is a historic step forward in strengthening economic and security ties, one that will help enhance the lives of millions of Vietnamese and advance peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

For others, human rights are the major concern. Whilst Vietnam has opened its economy, it remains a one-Party state in which freedom of expression, association and religion are curbed. Religious leaders, civil society activists and bloggers face daily harassments and intimidation simply for peacefully expressing their views, and have no legal framework to protect them.

We therefore call on you, Mr. President, to make a truly historic gesture on Vietnam. We urge you to press for the release of Vietnam's most longstanding prisoner of conscience, the Buddhist monk and prominent dissident Thich Quang Do. This gesture would be deeply meaningful for the Vietnamese people, for Buddhism has a 2,000-year history in Vietnam, and has deeply influenced the nation's culture and thinking. It would also give Vietnam the opportunity to demonstrate its willingness for progress, and reaffirm the United States' determination to make human rights the cornerstone of this strengthened relationship.

Fifth Supreme Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), a renowned spiritual leader, scholar, dissident and many-times Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Thich Quang Do, 87, has spent more than three decades in detention for his peaceful advocacy of religious freedom, democracy and human rights. For protesting the creation of a State-sponsored Buddhist Church, in 1982 he was sent into internal exile in northern Vietnam for ten years along with his mother, who died of cold and hunger in the harsh environment. In 1995, he was sentenced to five years in prison for organising a rescue mission for flood victims in the Mekong Delta, charged with "undermining national solidarity". During his years in exile and prison, Thich Quang Do translated an 8,000-page "Great Dictionary of Buddhist Terms" into Vietnamese, a work of erudition that has won overwhelming acclaim.

Released in 1998 due to international pressure, notably thanks to an appeal by the then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Thich Quang Do was placed under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). "I went from a small prison into a larger prison", he said. Since then, he has remained under house arrest without any formal indictment or charge. His communications are monitored and he is denied freedom of movement and citizenship rights. Thich Quang Do is a recipient of the prestigious Rafto Prize for human rights defenders, and, along with others in the country's democracy movement, the World Movement for Democracy's "Democracy Courage Tribute".

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From house arrest, Thich Quang Do continues to press Vietnam to respect all human rights for all. In August 2015, he told visiting US Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski that *“human rights are the tools with which we can build a prosperous and caring society, based on mutual respect and the rule of law.”* Thich Quang Do even evoked your possible visit to Vietnam, expressing hopes that the U.S. President would *“win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people by speaking out for human rights.”*

Mr. President,

In your memorable speech to the Australian Parliament in 2011 on the United States’ policy of “redressment to Asia” you said: *“History is on the side of the free -- free societies, free governments, free economies, free people. And the future belongs to those who stand firm for those ideals, in this region and around the world”.*

Thich Quang Do has sacrificed his own safety and liberty to stand firm for these ideals. We earnestly urge you to stand by him now, and win back his freedom at last.

Sincerely,

Co-sponsors:

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Gunnar Sørbø, Chairman, Rafto Foundation for Human Rights
Salil Shetty, General Secretary, Amnesty International
Jennifer Clement, President, PEN International
Karim Lahidji, President, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
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Signatories:

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Lord Alton, *House of Lords, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea (UK)*

Rebiya Kadeer, *President, World Uyghur Congress, Rafto Prize Laureate, Tom Lantos Prize winner 2015*

Fr. José Raúl Vera López, *Bishop of Saltillo México, Rafto Prize Laureate 2010*

Mons. Vaclav Maly, *Catholic Bishop of Prague, President, the Justice and Peace Commission, Czech Bishops' Conference*

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