

Vietnam Committee welcomes President George W. Bush's meeting with Vietnamese democracy activists at the White House

PARIS, 30th May 2007 (Quê Me) - **Quê Me : Action for Democracy in Vietnam** and the **Vietnam Committee on Human Rights** welcome U.S. President George W. Bush's meeting with four Vietnamese-American democracy activists at the White House yesterday to discuss concerns on human rights and democracy in Vietnam. The meeting, which was also attended by Vice-President Dick Cheney, comes just before the Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet makes his first visit to Washington in late June 2007. One of the four activists, Cong Thanh Do, founder member of the unofficial People's Democratic Party of Vietnam, was arrested during a trip to Vietnam last year and released thanks to pressure from the United States.

Mr. Vo Van Ai, President of Quê Me and the Vietnam Committee for Human Rights described the meeting as a *"timely and welcome sign for all those working for a peaceful transition to democracy in Vietnam"*, since it took place during a period of intensified political repression in Vietnam. *"This meeting shows that the United States is listening to the voices of civil society in Vietnam"*, said Vo Van Ai. *"It reaffirms the commitment made by President Bush in his second inaugural speech : "anyone who lives in tyranny and hopelessness should know : The United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for liberty, we will stand with you"*.

Nevertheless, Mr. Ai expressed his hope that ***"this meeting will not merely be a diplomatic gesture, but a real sign of the United States' engagement to support movements and individuals in Vietnam, and more generally in Asia, in their peaceful struggle for democracy. Home to three fifths of the world's population, Asia is also home to some of the world's worst dictatorships which are rallying together to silence all voices of dissent. Asian democrats are struggling against formidable odds, and merit the support of the international community in their efforts to promote human rights and democracy in this crucial region of the world"***.

Mr. Ai noted that scores of human rights defenders, democratic activists, lawyers, journalists, trade unionists and religious leaders had been arrested over the past months, and many condemned to harsh prison sentences in a wave of unfair trials. Religious repression has also increased against members of un-recognized religious movements such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), Hoa Hao and Protestants, noting that UBCV Deputy leader Venerable Thich Quang Do is spending his 26th year under house arrest for his appeals for democracy and human rights.

This wave of repression follows a brief period of feigned democratic opening prior to the APEC Summit in Hanoi in November 2006, when Vietnam's Communist leaders were seeking membership of the WTO, PNTR status with the United States, and removal of Vietnam from the religious blacklist of "Countries of Particular Concern". Once these goals were obtained, Vietnam launched a nationwide crack-down, arresting and detaining all these critics.

Activists convicted to prison sentences over the past month are Father Nguyen Van Ly, Nguyen Phong, Nguyen Binh Thanh, Hoang Thi Anh Dao and Le Thi Le Hang sentenced to up to 8 years in prison on 30 March 2007 ; Hoa Hao Buddhists Nguyen Van Tho, Duong Thi Tron, Le Van Soc, Nguyen Van Thuy to up to 6 years prison (3 May) ; Le Nguyen Sang, Nguyen Bac Truyen, Huynh Nguyen Dao to 5, 4, and three years respectively (10 May) ; lawyers Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan to 5 and 4 years respectively (11 May) ; Tran Quoc Hien to 5 years in prison (15 May). All must serve long periods of house arrest after their release.

Many other dissidents remain in custody, such as lawyer Le Quoc Quan, arrested in March 2007 after completing a Fellowship at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington D.C., and five members of the United Workers-Farmers Organization of Vietnam. UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, 87 and his deputy Thich Quang Do, 79, remain under house arrest without trial respectively at the Nguyen Thieu Monastery in Binh Dinh, and the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon.