

World leaders at the APEC Summit should press Vietnam to cease assault on human rights and freedom of religion or belief

PARIS, 9th November 2017 (VCHR) – Mr. Võ Văn Ái, President of the Paris-based Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) has sent an Open Letter calling on world leaders at the 25th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Đà Nẵng from 11-12 November to press Vietnam to uphold its binding international obligations and cease repressing citizens who simply speak out for human rights and freedom of religion or belief.

The Summit takes place as Vietnam is pursuing “*the fiercest assault on human rights in recent years*” with arrests and harsh sentences of human rights defenders, bloggers and civil society activists such as [Mẹ Nấm \(Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh\)](#), [Trần Thị Nga](#) and [Nguyễn Văn Đài](#).

Mr. Ai denounced grave violations of freedom of religion or belief - “*the mother of all freedoms*” - such as the 30-year detention of Buddhist monk and scholar [Thích Quang Đô](#). Whilst Vietnam hosts the Summit near the famed Buddhist grottoes of the Marble Mountains, it is “*suppressing the 2,000-year heritage of Vietnamese Buddhism by outlawing the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), banning its religious activities and ruthlessly repressing its followers*”.

The 2017 APEC Summit’s theme of “*Creating New Dynamism, Fostering a Shared Future*” could only become reality if its members stood firm on their commitment to human rights and the rule of law: “*Vietnam’s future, and the “shared future” of the Asia-Pacific region depend on the decision you make today to place decency, dignity and democratic freedoms at the centre of economic cooperation and trade*”, wrote Võ Văn Ái.

Open Letter to APEC Members at the 25th Summit in Đà Nẵng, 11-12 November 2017

As you gather in Đà Nẵng for the 25th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, I am writing to express my deep concern about grave human rights violations

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in the host country, Vietnam. I urge you to press your Vietnamese partner to uphold its binding international obligations and cease persecuting citizens for their legitimate appeals for human rights, democracy and freedom of religion or belief.

APEC is an influential forum, accounting for almost 40% of the world's population, 57% of the global GDP and 49% of international trade. The aim of the 21 member economies is to promote economic growth and prosperity, and the 2017 summit's theme is "*Creating a New Dynamism, Fostering a Shared Future*". Yet this shared future of growth and prosperity is surely only attainable if it is based on a common commitment to the principles of freedom and human rights?

As history has proved, economic development and human rights are not incompatible. On the contrary, they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Development is freedom, said Indian Nobel Economics laureate Amartya Sen, but he stressed that this freedom can only exist when "*economic opportunities, political freedoms, social facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security*" are equally guaranteed.

Whilst the APEC Summit takes place, Vietnam is pursuing the fiercest assault on human rights in recent years. In the past twelve months, at least 28 people have been arrested under vaguely-worded "[national security](#)" crimes which have been strongly denounced by the United Nations and many APEC member states. Prominent bloggers and human right defenders such as [Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh \(Mẹ Nấm\)](#) and [Trần Thị Nga](#) were condemned to ten and nine years in prison respectively this summer. Human rights lawyer [Nguyễn Văn Đài](#) has been detained for over 22 months without trial, and is now charged with "subversion" which is punishable by death.

[The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief – the mother of all freedoms – is gravely violated in Vietnam](#). The venue of this year's APEC Summit has a deep symbolic significance for religious followers. The Marble Mountains (*Ngũ Hành Sơn*) in Đà Nẵng contain some of Vietnam's most remarkable Buddhist grottoes devoted to the Bodhisattva of Compassion Kwan Yin, and represent a place of pilgrimage and spiritual retreat. Yet whilst the government promotes tourism and draws revenues from these sites, it is suppressing the 2,000-year heritage of Vietnamese Buddhism by outlawing the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), banning its religious activities and ruthlessly repressing its followers.

Today, the UBCV's leader, Most Venerable [Thích Quảng Độ](#), 89, a renowned scholar, dissident and 16-times Nobel Peace Prize nominee, is under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City. He is deprived of citizenship rights and held under constant Police surveillance. A symbol of the growing movement for democracy and human rights in Vietnam, Thích Quang Độ has spent the past thirty years in prison, internal exile and house arrest. In May 2017, Police prevented him from

travelling to Hué to enjoy the care of his disciples at the Long Quang Pagoda on the grounds that “*he is not welcome*” in Hué. [Lê Công Cầu](#), the UBCV’s Secretary-general and leader of the Buddhist Youth Movement (*Gia đình Phật tử Việt Nam*) is constantly interrogated, harassed and forbidden to travel by Police. Scores of members of the Buddhist Youth Movement have been threatened and placed under restrictions during major Buddhist festivals such as the Vesak and the Lunar New Year.

Vietnam is not only using force, but also the law to curb freedom of religion or belief. In November 2016, Vietnam adopted a [“Law on Belief and Religion”](#) which imposes tight controls on religions and legalizes state oversight of religious affairs. Independent religious groups such as the UBCV, Khmer Krom Buddhists, many Protestant house churches, independent Hoa Hao or Cao Dai which do not accept the Communist Party’s intrusive interference will be extremely vulnerable when this law comes into force on 1st January 2018.

Vietnam’s future, and the “shared future” of the Asia-Pacific region depend on the commitment you make today to place decency, dignity and democratic freedoms at the centre of your efforts to promote economic cooperation and trade.

Võ Văn Ái
President,
Quê Mẹ: Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

Established in 1989, the 21-member APEC bloc comprises Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), Thailand, the US and Vietnam. Heads of State including Xi Jin'ping, Donald Trump, Justin Trudeau and Vladimir Putin are expected to attend this year's event.