

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 20, 2011

The Honorable David Shear
U.S. Ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Ambassador Shear,

We would like congratulate you on your recent confirmation as the fifth U.S. Ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since the formal normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1995. Your appointment comes at a pivotal time as Vietnam pursues economic gains through its bilateral relations with the U.S. but continues to fail on what the United States regards as a priority: respect for the fundamental human rights of its citizens.

Before your departure to Hanoi, we hope to provide you with a snapshot of Vietnam through the eyes of Congress, and to express our deep concerns about Vietnam's efforts to tighten controls over the Internet, press, and freedom of speech, and its suppression of political dissent, religious freedom, assembly, and association. We also have outstanding concerns over the Vietnamese Government's apparent lack of concern for the rule of law and its failure to demonstrate political will in combating human trafficking, particularly labor trafficking. As you work to strengthen the bonds of diplomatic ties, we hope that you can be an advocate for the country's greatest asset: its people.

The freedom to connect to strengthen educational ties

Your dedication to furthering your predecessor's commitment to U.S.-Vietnam educational cooperation must also be coupled with advocacy for a free Internet. When the Vietnamese government curtails Internet freedom, they are placing limits on the country's economic future as well as on people's social mobility and education.

Vietnam's rapid growth in Internet penetration since 2000 is a promising development. With more Internet users logging on and spending more of their time online, the Internet has become a place for civil society to grow, but is also an increasing target for repression.

Despite the intermittent blocking of Facebook since 2009, its estimated reach is still increasing, pointing to a greater desire for the freedom to connect. However, and perhaps because of the increase in citizens going online for information or networking, Hanoi has used the same repressive tactics towards journalists online as it has in traditional media, recently issuing a

government decree that will significantly stifle online free speech. It is also widely reported that cyber-attacks originating from Vietnam have crippled dissident websites. And, even more alarming is the fact that the restriction of Internet freedom has been taken offline: dozens of bloggers and cyber-activists have experienced harassing and detainment in recent years.

Understanding the impact of the Internet, Members of the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam have spent the last year taking proactive steps advocating for the protection of Internet freedom in Vietnam and urging Internet Service Providers (ISPs) like Google and Yahoo to protect the privacy of Internet users in Vietnam, while the Government of Vietnam has taken unlawful steps to tighten its control over the Internet.

As Secretary of State Clinton noted in this year's speech on Internet freedom, "there isn't an economic internet and a social internet and a political internet; there's just the internet." We respectfully request that you urge the Vietnamese government to grant its citizens access to the Internet, without the intrusion and intimidation of the online police.

Repression of dissent

As the firewalls in Vietnam are growing stronger, the Hanoi regime has taken concerted steps to silence Vietnam's voices of conscience.

The Vietnamese government holds in its cells hundreds of political and religious prisoners whose "crime" is to peacefully advocate for social justice and religious freedom.

Particularly, we are concerned about the recent conviction of seven religious and pro-democracy activists in Ben Tre province on May 30, 2011. According to human rights groups, this was one of the biggest political trials in Vietnam to date and the defendants were denied their right to an open and fair trial according to the Vietnamese Constitution and international norms. This is but one of the many instances where peaceful democratic advocacy was met with political imprisonment. Others, just to name a few, include: Cu Huy Ha Vu, Le Cong Dinh, Nguyen Van Hai, Phan Thanh Hai, and Father Nguyen Van Ly who is on medical parole due to his deteriorating health, and yet still serving his sentence. These are but a few of the many instances where democracy advocacy has been met with political imprisonment.

Pastors, priests, and members of Vietnam's diverse religious community face increased scrutiny, forced renunciation of faith, harassment, arrest, and imprisonment for following their religious convictions. Catholics, Protestants, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Montagnards, Hmong Protestants, Khmer Buddhists, and others report severe abuses, the confiscation and destruction of church property, and intense government oversight into religious practices, congregational meetings and activities. Rather than encourage religious expression, the Government of Vietnam continues to suppress peoples of faith.

We urge you to call on the Vietnamese government to unconditionally release prisoners detained for peaceful advocacy of their beliefs and to stop repressing religious freedom. As the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, we encourage you to meet often with political prisoners and their relatives as this would be a clear indication that the United States regards human rights as a

priority in U.S.-Vietnam relations. Additionally, these visits will provide you with an opportunity to hear first-hand the human rights challenges facing Vietnamese citizens.

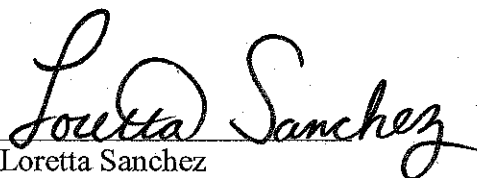
Rule of law

We encourage you to deepen the focus on legal reform by insisting that the Government of Vietnam repeal or revise ordinances or decrees including vague national security provisions such as Articles 79, 88, and 258 which are frequently used to arrest and detain peaceful citizens who advocate for religious freedom, free speech and association. We also urge you to work with the Vietnamese government to ensure that laws such as the 2004 Ordinance on Religious Beliefs and Religious Organizations do not restrict the practice of religious freedom and that laws on labor export as well as the newly passed legislation on trafficking in persons be strictly enforced so as to punish the traffickers while protecting the victims.

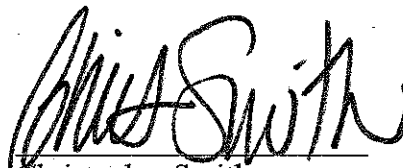
We look forward to the day when Vietnam lives up to the commitments enshrined in its constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Vietnam is a party, and allows its entire population the right to freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right of association.

It is our hope to work with you and the Administration in order that human rights are considered an integral part of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, and to give voice to the many Vietnamese advocates and activists who are peacefully seeking internationally recognized human rights in their homeland.

Sincerely,



Loretta Sanchez
Member of Congress



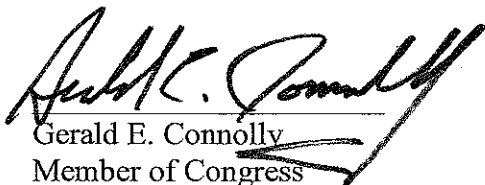
Christopher Smith
Member of Congress



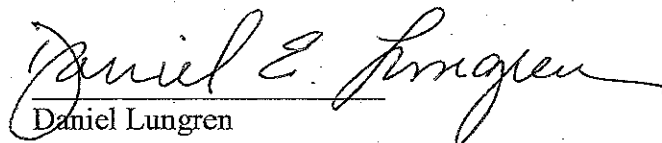
Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress



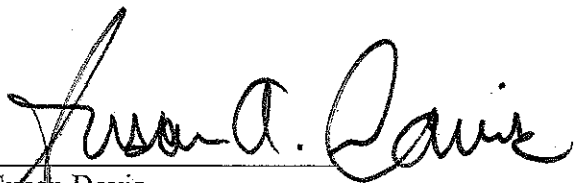
Frank Wolf
Member of Congress



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Daniel Lungren
Member of Congress



Susan Davis
Member of Congress



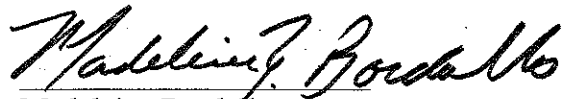
Edward Royce
Member of Congress



Michael Honda
Member of Congress



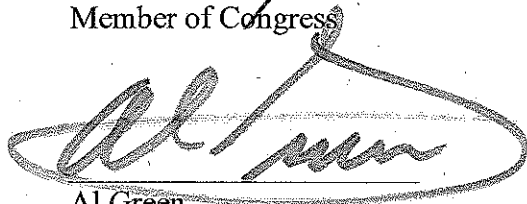
Mike Coffman
Member of Congress



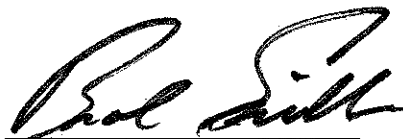
Madeleine Bordallo
Member of Congress



Bob Filner
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Al Green
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Brad Miller
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