



## **Main Committee**

### **Grievance Debate**

#### **Vietnam: Human Rights**

**Monday, 25 October 2010**

**Mr HAYES** (Fowler) (9:30 PM) —I rise to speak about a concerning human rights issue in Vietnam. Since I last spoke about this issue, over the past five months another four Vietnamese human rights activists have been arrested by the Vietnamese authorities. Mr Pham Minh Hoang, a 55-year-old lecturer from the Ho Chi Minh University of Technology, was arrested on 13 August. The Rev. Duong Kim Khai, a 52-year-old member of the Mennonite Church in Vietnam, was arrested on 10 August. Ms Tran Thi Thuy, a 39-year-old merchant, was arrested on the same day, 10 August, in Dong Thap. Mr Nguyen Thanh Tam, a 57-year-old farmer, was arrested on 18 July in Ben Tre.

These individuals had peacefully expressed their concerns about social justice and freedom of religion in their country. Disturbingly, the location of Mr Pham Minh Hoang has not been disclosed to his family, despite repeated requests for information from the government. I am advised that his family has been continually harassed by local authorities. I further understand that the Vietnamese government has detained the political prisoners, accusing them of 'aiming to overthrow the socialist government', a crime which may lead to a death penalty. The member for McMahon and I have recently written to the Minister for Foreign Affairs urging Australia to use its full diplomatic relationship with Vietnam to ensure these political prisoners are treated fairly.

The distressing human rights situation in Vietnam was brought closer to home earlier this month with the arrest of Mrs Hong Vo, an Australian citizen of Vietnamese ancestry. Mrs Vo was taking part in a peaceful demonstration in Hanoi to promote democratic reform in Vietnam. Thankfully, Mrs Vo was released and returned home late last week. I am sure it goes without saying that members in this place would express our best wishes to Mrs Vo and her family.

These arrests are further examples of human rights abuses which are regrettably all too common in Vietnam. According to the latest Human Rights Watch report on Vietnam, dozens of democracy advocates, religious activists, human rights defenders and online critics have been arrested since 2009. They were detained under vaguely worded national security laws such as spreading 'anti-government propaganda' or 'abusing democratic freedoms'. There are more than 400 people imprisoned in Vietnam for the exercise of fundamental rights. Quite frankly, we should all find that astounding.

It is also astounding that Vietnamese law authorises arbitrary 'administrative detention' without trial. Furthermore, dissidents and others deemed to be national security threats can be involuntarily committed to mental institutions or detained in state-run rehabilitation centres. To any Australian who enjoys the freedoms of this country, this must be shocking.

As Vietnam is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the international community can rightly expect that it will uphold the civil and political rights of individuals, including the most basic rights of freedom of speech, press, expression, religion and assembly. These are all commitments that we sign up for when we sign that covenant, as Vietnam has done. Since its accession to the World Trade Organisation, Vietnam's positive economic record is commendable. However, the government's attitude towards human rights remains of concern.

I want to thank Viet Tan for bringing these disturbing matters to my attention. Viet Tan is a pro-democracy group with members inside Vietnam and around the world. Viet Tan aims to bring about democratic change in Vietnam's through non-violent means and civil engagement. I have had the pleasure of working with Dr Phong Nguyen, a cardiologist at Liverpool Hospital in my electorate. He is a member of Viet Tan's leadership team in Australia. Dr Nguyen and Viet Tan organiser Tan Nguyen are strong advocates for advancing human rights in Vietnam.

Dr Nguyen is a man who has obviously reaped the benefits of a very good education in this country. He now gives back to this country in a most critical way through the work he does at Liverpool Hospital, but he is also committed to fighting for his countrymen in Vietnam. He is a man of considerable integrity and he has earned my respect. I commend Dr Nguyen and all members of Viet Tan for their commitment to furthering human rights in Vietnam. For the sake of the people of Vietnam I truly hope their efforts bear fruit.

There are a number of other organisations operating in Australia who have a focus on making a difference for the better in Vietnam. One of those organisations is Vietnam Vision. In my electorate the Rotary Club of Liverpool West provides annual funding to a Vietnam Vision team led by local surgeons who travel to Vietnam each year and perform up to 300 cataract operations, restoring sight, free of charge, for the poor in Vietnam. Members of the club also travel with the team, meeting their own travel costs, to provide logistical support for the surgeons on the trip.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting with members of the club and local doctors, including Mr Trung Chinh Dang, Dr William Trinh, Dr Le Duc Hong, Mr Thuan Ngyuen, Mr Charles Hill, Mr Joe Cauchi and Mr Ted Mlynarz. It was very rewarding to hear firsthand what these volunteers experienced in Vietnam and the circumstances under which the cataract surgeries took place. After his first visit to Vietnam, Ted Mlynarz wrote:

I was able to see the patients, already prepared for the operation, waiting their turn, noticing their anxiety, and maybe fear. However, once the operation was over, I could see the relief and joy in their general persona.

This is a local organisation making a difference for the better for people in Vietnam. The Vietnam Vision volunteers from my electorate are people who do not sit idly by and watch what happens in Vietnam; they choose to make a difference. I commend them for the action they take.

In closing, can I say that there has been a disturbing increase over the past few years in the number of people arrested in Vietnam for advocating for human rights issues. Their so-called crimes have included supporting political groups not recognised by the state, criticising government policies, calling for democracy, giving interviews to foreign journalists and providing legal advice to other dissidents on trial. As a nation we should be doing all that we can to urge the Vietnamese government to adhere to the International Bill of Human

Rights, which that government ratified and pledged to obey back in 1982. Australia is a nation which greatly respects human rights. This respect is echoed through our political and legal systems and, quite frankly, is embodied in our culture. It is our duty, therefore, wherever possible, to advocate for human rights throughout all countries.

Once again, I say that I support all those organisations in my electorate who do such good work on issues such as human rights in Vietnam. I salute those Vietnam Vision volunteers I have mentioned, who have taken it upon themselves to make a positive difference in people's lives—people who would not otherwise have been able to avail themselves of cataract surgery. The Vietnam Vision volunteers have put that surgery within the means of the poor of Vietnam. They should be congratulated.