



The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
White House 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

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.

Leader 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”.

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:

Vo Van Ai, President, Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, Quê Me

Gunnar Sørnbø, 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)

Art Kaufman, Senior Director, World Movement for Democracy

Simon Panek, Managing Director, People in Need Foundation

Robert Hårdh, Executive Director, Civil Rights Defenders

Steven Hawkins, Executive Director, Amnesty International USA

John Edmundson, President, Agir Ensemble pour les Droits de l’Homme

Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, President, Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice

Signatories:

Jody Williams, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, USA

Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Rafto Prize Laureate, Iran

Mairead Maguire, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Ireland

Tawakkol Karman, Nobel Peace Laureate, Yemen

Kerry Kennedy, President, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, USA

Carl Gershman, President, National Endowment for Democracy, USA

Hon. Kim Campbell, *Former Prime Minister of Canada, Chair of Steering Committee, World Movement for Democracy*

Robert Hermann, *Vice President for International Programs, Freedom House, USA*

David J. Kramer, *Senior Director for Human Rights & Democracy, McCain Institute for International Leadership, USA*

James S. Denton, *Publisher/Editor, World Affairs Journal, USA*

Joshua Muravchik, *Distinguished Fellow, World Affairs Institute, USA*

Kevin Bales, PhD, *Visiting Prof. of Human Rights, University of Chicago, USA*

Knut Vollebaek, *Former Foreign Minister of Norway*

Emma Bonino, *Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Italy*

Hon. David Kilgour, *Former Canadian Minister of State for Asia-Pacific*

Lord Avebury, *House of Lords, Vice-Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights (UK)*

Baroness Berridge, *House of Lords, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom or Belief (UK)*

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*

Peter Van Dalen, *Member of the European Parliament, Co-Chair of EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief*

Laura Agea, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Ramon Tremosa I Balcells, *Member of the European Parliament, Catalonia*

Brando Benifei, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Fabio Massimo Castaldo, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Kostas Chrysogonos, *Member of the European Parliament, Greece*

Ignazio Corrao, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

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Stefan Eck, *Member of the European Parliament, Germany*

Eleonora Evi, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Ana Maria Gomes, *Member of the European Parliament, Portugal*

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Nathalie Griesbeck, *Member of the European Parliament, France*

Jean Lambert, *Member of the European Parliament, UK*

Giulia Moi, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Bronis Ropė, *Member of the European Parliament, Lithuania*

Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, *Member of the European Parliament, France*

Barbara Spinelli, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Dario Tamburrano, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Ivo Vajgl, *Member of the European Parliament, Slovenia*

Marco Valli, *Member of the European Parliament, Italy*

Julie Ward, *Member of the European Parliament, United Kingdom*

Jana Žitnanska, *Member of the European Parliament, Slovakia*

Noel Mamère, *Member of the National Assembly, Mayor of Bègles, France*

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Bjorn Engesland, *Secretary General Norwegian Helsinki Committee*

Maria Dahle, *Executive Director, Human Rights House Foundation, Norway*

Gunvor Kronman, *CEO Finland*

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Prof. Sascha Feuchert, *Vice-President German PEN Center, Writers in Prison Committee*
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Mervyn Thomas, *Chief Executive, Christian Solidarity Worldwide*
Edwin A. Cranston, *Professor of Japanese Literature, Harvard University*
Zohra Yusuf, *FIDH Vice President, & Chairperson, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan*
Michael Y. M. Kau, *Former Deputy Foreign Minister, Senior Fellow, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy*
Fr. Ismael "Padre Melo" Moreno Coto, *Rafto Prize Laureate 2015, Honduras*
Mgr Bulambo Lembelembe Josué, *Coordinator Peace and Reconciliation Programme, Church of Christ in DR Congo, Rafto Prize laureate 2008*
N. Paul Divakar, *Chairperson, Asia Dalit Rights Forum – Rafto Prize Laureate 2007*
Maryam Al-Khawaja, *Co-Director Gulf Center for Human Rights, Rafto Prize Laureate 2013*
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Dr. Peter Molnar, *Poet, Senior Research Fellow, Central European University, Budapest, Rafto Prize Laureate 1989*
Dr. Ian Hancock, *Director of Romani Studies, University of Texas, Rafto Prize Laureate 1996*
Dr. Frank Mugisha, *Executive Director, Sexual Minorities Uganda, Rafto Prize Laureate, 2011 and Robert F. Kennedy Prize Laureate*
Paulos Tesfagiorgis, *Senior Advisor at International IDEA, Johannesburg, South Africa and Eritrea, Rafto Prize Laureate 2003*
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Nnimmo Bassey, *Director, Health of Mother Earth Foundation, Rafto Prize Laureate 2012*
Dr. Pavel Chikov, *Director, Agora, Kazan, Tartarstan, Russia, Rafto Prize Laureate 2014*
Muireann O'Briain, *Former Executive Director of ECPAT International, Rafto Prize laureate 1998*
Prof. Kariane Westrheim, *University of Bergen, Chair, EU Turkey Civic Commission*
Marco Pannella, *Former MEP, leader and founder of the Nonviolent Radical Party, Italy*
Judge Essa Moosa, *Judge, High Court of South Africa, International Peace and Reconciliation Initiative*
Hannah Forster, *African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (The Gambia)*
Poengky Indarty, *Executive Director, Imparsial, Indonesia*
Gustavo Amaya, *President, Training Center and Promotion of Democracy, San Salvador*
Vanida Thephsouhvanh, *President, Lao Movement for Human Rights*
Olivier Dupuis, *Journalist, former Member of the European Parliament, Belgium*
Alvin Jacobson, *Amnesty International USA, Group 56 Case coordinator*
Taeho Lee, *Secretary General, People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, South Korea*