



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

JUL 17 2006

Dear Senator Smith:

I would like to respond to the concerns about religion in Vietnam that you raised with Deputy Assistant Secretary Eric John at the July 12 Senate Finance Committee hearing on Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for Vietnam. This letter provides additional information on religious freedom in Vietnam as you and other Members of Congress prepare for the PNTR vote.

You asked about the status of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Baptists in Vietnam. There are communities of all three of these denominations in Vietnam actively practicing their religion. For the most part, these Churches remain unregistered under the new legal framework for religion, although they have been in contact with Vietnamese authorities and are seeking formal registration status.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have been asked over the last two months to submit registration application documents. The Church of the Latter Day Saints is in the midst of deciding in which jurisdiction to make its application. The Baptist World Alliance leadership recently visited Vietnam and met with senior officials of the Government's Commission on Religious Affairs and large groups of Baptists, including those from unregistered churches. A few Baptists churches have already registered under the new legal framework. Most others operate freely in Vietnam and report marked improvements in religious freedom over the last two years.

I note that regarding the appointment of Catholic Bishops, another subject that was raised at the July 12 hearing, the Government of Vietnam does maintain the right of refusal, but in the past ten years it has not refused any bishops that the Catholic Church has nominated.

The Honorable
Gordon Smith,
United States Senate.

These developments take place within the context of a considerable expansion of religious freedom in Vietnam in the last two years. Since Vietnam was designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” in 2004 under the International Religious Freedom Act, it has rewritten its legal framework governing the practice of religion. The new framework specifically guarantees the right of religion, formally bans the forced renunciation of faith, and allows for religious practice in unregistered house churches.

As described in DAS John’s testimony, the new framework has resulted in significant improvements on the ground and enlarged the space for religious practice. The Commission for Religious Affairs has started reaching out to unregistered religious groups to encourage them to register. Religious leaders tell us that they experience fewer difficulties with local authorities and reports of forced renunciations of faith have declined sharply.

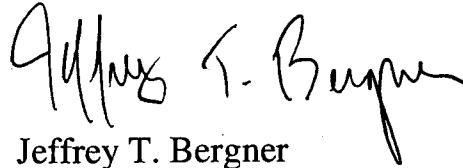
While these developments are positive, there is room for improvement. We are urging the Vietnamese Government to speed up the implementation of the new framework in the remote provinces of north and northwestern Vietnam, where the Christian faith is attracting new followers rapidly and reports of violations of religious freedom still continue to surface.

The overall picture of religion in Vietnam is complex as described in the Vietnam chapter of the latest International Religious Freedom Report, which I have enclosed. The report provides extensive detail on the religious practices of Vietnam’s Buddhists, who are estimated to number as many as half of Vietnam’s population or 40 million people. Vietnam also has an estimated 6-8 million Catholics, 1.6 million Protestants, as well as Muslims, Baha’i, Cao Dai, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The overwhelming majority of adherents to these faiths practice their religion freely in religious services conducted in every province of Vietnam. Their worship adds to Vietnam’s diversity, strength, and dynamism.

The Department shares your concern for the importance of religious freedom and I appreciate your support for PNTR for Vietnam. Please let me know if you have additional questions on this subject.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeffrey T. Bergner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

Jeffrey T. Bergner
Assistant Secretary
Legislative Affairs

Enclosures:

Vietnam Chapter of the International Religious Freedom Report