



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Press Statement

Richard Boucher, Spokesman

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United States -Vietnam Religious Freedom Agreement

We are pleased to announce that we have concluded an agreement with the Government of Vietnam that addresses a number of important religious freedom concerns. Vietnam's progress on these issues and the outstanding work to be done will be topics of discussion during Deputy Secretary Zoellick's visit to Hanoi on Friday, May 6.

This achievement advances a key component of the President's freedom agenda. Working with Congress under the International Religious Freedom Act, the Bush Administration has secured continuing cooperation with Vietnam on our religious freedom concerns. The commitments made by the Government of Vietnam result from our work over the past several years to advance religious freedom in that country.

In recent weeks, Vietnam banned the practice of forced or coerced renunciations of faith, released a number of prominent prisoners of concern, and has begun to register and to permit the reopening of churches that had previously been closed. Most importantly, Vietnam has also enacted significant legislative reforms that hold the promise of major improvements in religious freedom in the near future. A new Ordinance on Religion took effect on November 15, 2004, and the crucial implementation regulations for this ordinance were just released in early March. These new laws and policies provide increased latitude and protection for religious belief and practice. In addition, the Prime Minister issued special instructions in February aimed at alleviating restrictions on religious practice faced by many Vietnamese Protestants.

To build on these first steps, the Vietnamese have made a significant number of commitments. The Government of Vietnam has committed to fully implement the new legislation on religious freedom and to render previous contradictory regulations obsolete. They have also committed to instruct local authorities to strictly and completely adhere to the new legislation and ensure their compliance. The Government of Vietnam will also facilitate the process by which religious congregations are able to open houses of worship, and give special consideration to prisoners and cases of concern raised by the United States during the granting of prisoner amnesties. While these commitments offer a strong foundation, other important public steps remain to be taken, and the United States will continue to monitor developments in Vietnam closely.

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