Religious Freedom Day on Capitol Hill

June 20, 2006

Location: Senate Dirksen Office Building, Room G50

Promoting, Protecting, Preserving Religious Freedom around the World

Overview of Religious Freedom in Egypt and Vietnam—By Jubilee Campaign

Thank you, Senator Santorum, for chairing and hosting this important event and, Senator Brownback, for your continuous leadership in undertaking the plight of the suffering and oppressed religious minorities around the world. I deeply respect and appreciate all that you do for the most vulnerable of humanity. Thank you, Nina Shea, for moderating today and for your tireless work at the USCIRF and Freedom House.

I am eager to provide an overview of the state of religious freedom in two countries: Egypt and Vietnam. The United States government has actively engaged both countries pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and in accord with the value of religious freedom which is deeply engrained in our national heritage. Although there has been some progress, both countries fall far short of affording to their religious minorities the freedom to practice their faith without prejudice or governmental interference. The Egyptian government does little to curtail societal discrimination and even persecution of religious minorities. International religious freedom standards recognize that freedom of belief includes the freedom to change one’s religious faith and identity. Neither country recognizes the free exercise of religion, and both countries restrict conversions of religious identity.

EGYPT

Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt - along with their Protestant, Anglican, and Catholic brothers and sisters, make up the largest religious minority community in the Middle East, which the Egyptian government estimates to be approximately 8% of the population but which the Christian minority places at 12% or more. Yet despite a rich religious tradition dating back to the evangelism of Saint Mark, Christians in Egypt are subjected to unequal and discriminatory treatment under the law. They are also all too often subjected to violent persecution at the hand of the country’s Muslim majority - particularly by its concentration of Islamic extremists.

Christians face near insurmountable legal hurdles simply to build or repair their churches. The 1856 Ottoman Hamayouni decree requires non-Muslims to obtain a Presidential decree to conduct any church construction, expansion or repair. The 1934 Al-Ezabi decree added that no church may be located within 100 meters of a mosque, and requires the approval of the neighboring Muslim community. Although President Mubarak has taken steps to ease this discriminatory burden on paper, little has changed in practice.
A 2005 U.S. State Department report notes that local government authorities continue to prevent construction and repair of churches, and often deny or delay permits for the supply of water and electricity to these structures. Moreover, Muslim groups have often set up makeshift mosques close to churches to prevent their building or repair.

Egyptian law requires Christian men to convert to Islam before marrying Muslim women. Christian girls and young women have been kidnapped, raped, and forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslim men. When parents of underage Christian girls seek their daughter’s return, they are often told that she willingly converted to Islam, and that custody will be transferred to a Muslim custodian who is likely to grant approval for an underage marriage.

Muslim converts to Christianity are called “apostates,” the penalty for which is death in the Qu’ran. Although Egyptian law does not proscribe criminal penalties for apostasy, converts have been convicted on charges of insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife. There is no legal means of registering a convert’s change in religious status (unless the conversion is to Islam), so Christian converts are often forced to solicit illicit identity papers. Jubilee Campaign has been informed by families so affected as well as Egyptian contacts that some are converts are prosecuted for falsifying documents. We have also represented asylum seekers from both the Christian and Ba’hai faith in Egypt whose children were forced to attend Islamic classes and forced to recite Islamic prayers at school because their identity papers could not be changed to their true faith. 

In addition to the legal inequality and discrimination faced by Egypt’s Christians, they have been subjected to violent attacks both by militant Islamic extremists and even otherwise ordinary Muslim neighbors. Police and other Egyptian authorities have shown little interest or effort in protecting Christian victims or prosecuting perpetrators, and have often been complicit in attacks. The following is a brief summary of incidents that have occurred in recent years.

- As the world was celebrating the dawn of a new millennium, 21 Christians were massacred by Muslims in the village of El-Kosheh, Upper Egypt while police stood by. In June 2004, Egypt’s highest appellate court upheld the acquittal of 94 out of 96 of the murderers, leaving no further legal options. Although 21 victims were Christian, one man was eventually convicted, Mr. Adel Shaboub—a Christian man who remains incarcerated and whose priest believes him to have been wrongly convicted with serious irregularities in the trial.

- In October 2003, The Washington Times reported that Egypt has launched an attack on Christian missionaries, arresting more than 20 in one week alone. Other reports state that Christian converts were taken to police stations in Cairo where they were subjected to beatings, torture, and interrogation.

- In January 2004, several Egyptian Christians were killed and many more injured when 300 armed soldiers began demolishing a Coptic Christian center for handicapped children near Cairo. Even a Coptic nun was beaten.
• In December 2004, the wife of a Coptic Priest was abducted and forced to convert to Islam. The forced conversion and complicity of police prompted Pope Shenouda III to go into seclusion at a desert monastery to draw attention to the increasing grievances suffered by Christians in Egypt. Finally the Priest's wife was returned to her husband - with officials claiming she just changed her mind.

• In February 2005, two young Christian girls, both medical students, were kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. Despite protests by hundreds of Coptic Christians, authorities refused to return the young women to their families. They claim the girls “officially announce and document their change of faith.”

• In December 2005, Protestant Pastor Ezzat Habib, under threat from Egypt’s security police for holding services in an “unregistered” church was run down by a taxi and murdered in Cairo.

• In January 2006, one Christian died and many more were injured when Muslims set fire to a Christian community center near Luxor.

• In March 2006, after 3 months of searching, the Christian family of Theresa Ghattass Kamal received a call from her saying she was being held against her will and forced to convert to Islam. When they found the house of her captors, Theresa was veiled except for her eyes, flanked by three Muslim men, and told her family in a trembling voice that she had converted willingly.

• Finally, and most recently on April 14, 2006, nearly simultaneous knife attacks on three Alexandria churches left one Christian—78 year old Nushi Atta Girgis—dead and seventeen others injured. Justice still eludes the victims despite false promises by Egyptian authorities to hold the perpetrators accountable. The following day when the crowd of Coptic Christian mourners also called for more security, hostile Muslims attacked the crowd leading to a near riot situation. One Muslim man was reportedly killed, 50 Muslims arrested, and five Christians arrested in the violence. Yet, the governments promise to investigate and issue a report in 30 days passed without either.

For the religious minorities to feel safe and secure in Egypt, the government must respond to injustice and prosecute those responsible for perpetrating the persecution and violence. In addition to the on-going and vital need for safety, religious minorities in Egypt need to receive equal access to all vocations within the society. Statistics show that despite being 8-12% of the population almost no Christians have risen in the military ranks or police ranks, have become judges, or have otherwise risen to higher government posts. Without equality before the law and within society, the hope for change will remain illusive.

VIETNAM

For two successive years, the Department of State had designated Vietnam as a country of particular concern. It is our belief that Vietnam continues to deserve that designation.
Despite a secret agreement signed on May 5, 2005, by the United States and Vietnam concerning religious freedom, the release of some prisoners of conscience, and the registration of a number of new churches, in practice much progress is still needed before the citizens of Vietnam can experience religious freedom.

Vietnam continues to be one of the most tightly controlled nations in the world. Registration if any church or assembly is required and anyone participating in un-registered gatherings to exercise religious practices face the possibility of arrest, imprisonment and torture. New regulations still require religious organizations to obtain government permission in order to operate. Only churches who have conducted “pure religious activities” since 1975 can register for official authorization. The Hmong, Montagnards, and other ethnic minorities are unable to meet these standards. According to recent eyewitness accounts, local authorities in the Central Highlands have used the new regulation as grounds to arrest Montagnards suspected of belonging to Christian groups that operate independently.

In early May, the law office of Thien An Law Firm, located at 10 Doan Tran Nghiep, Hanoi, Vietnam, issued a report in which eight serious incidents were highlighted of religious persecution from the end of 2005 through the first four months of April. Those are listed in an appendix to my statement today. Just this morning, lawyer and human rights activist, Nguyen Van Dai, released a chilling report of the persecution by Vietnamese Public Security Police in Thanh Hoa Province of the Full Gospel Church. We received this appeal this morning:

According to the (Phuc Am Toan Ven) Church, yesterday, June 18, 2006, Mr. Nguyen Trung Ton, the man in charge of the Church at Thieu Vien Village, Thieu Hoa District, Thanh Hoa Province, was seriously beaten by the authorities thanks to his activities in the Church. The man who beat him is Mr. Nguyen Manh Hoe, Chief Police of Thieu Vien Village. We are attaching the photo that shows Mr. Ton after the incident. You can see the running blood on the wound and his shirt. We are appealing all the Human Rights Movements, Freedom of Religious Protection Groups worldwide to take action to stop the Vietnamese government from oppressing the religions and to give help to protect the Protestant followers at Thanh Hoa Province.

Earlier this month, Nguyen Van Dai “David” who has previously represented jailed pastors in Vietnam and recently advocated democratic changes in Vietnam, informed Jubilee Campaign that it had become his turn. On June 1 he was called for questioning by police. He wrote in an email:

Yesterday, June 1, 2006, at 5.45pm there were two security officers came to my office, they gave me a convocational paper that requests me to be in Hanoi police station at 6.00pm. When I came there, there was two security officer and they questioned me about how did I know Mr. Hoang Minh Chinh? when? how many times we met together? Did I draft the Party regulations by myself? And Did I organize the meeting between Foreign Diplomats and some dissidents? And they asked me about some of my articles that have been posted on BBC, RFA. Finally, they ask me what do
you think about your works? I told him that what I have been doing for Human Rights are legal and my legal rights. But they said that: "you violated the criminal law". ... they and I have very different understanding about Constitutional and law. I believe that the Vietnamese people can do what the Constitutional and law of Vietnam do not forbid. But they suppose that the Vietnamese people can do only what the Constitutional and law allow. ... Because of my above decision, they will be able to arrest me in the coming days.

Since then, he reports that his cell phone number has been disconnected three times. We must stand together with David Nguyen and for the democracy and religious freedom that he seeks for all citizens of Vietnam.

Thank you for this opportunity to raise the on-going need for religious freedom in these two countries.

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APPENDIX

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During the last four months, there happened many incidents of Christian persecutions, some of which were very serious:

1. Mr. Chang A Hu, age 34, a H’mong Christian reported that by the end of the year 2005, his family together with 8 other families migrated from Hoi Man, village Muong Mo, district Muong Te, Lai Chau province to Nam Vi, Trung Hai village, district Muong Nhe, Dien Bien. They met 7 other H’mong families migrated from other places. All these families are Christians.

On April 14, 2006, a group of 39 officers including soldiers post 405, police, cadres of Trung Hai district, came to these families’ places. They took away almost all of the families’ assets such as money, clothes, working tools, destroyed and burned thier tents. They then took two brothers namely Chang A Phu age 25 and Chang A Lenh age 30 to the Trung Hai office. They detained the brothers for 24 days and beat them seriously.

On April 18, 2006, a group of 90 officers including soldiers post 405, police, cadres of Trung Hai district, came to destroy cruelly 16 families’ newly-built tents. They took away all of the families’ left assets. They beat brother Thao A Tu to the point where his blood came from his mouth. They
handcuffed him, beat him until he was unconscious. They left because they thought he was dead. He keeps the handcuff until now. 16 households, 150 family members were robbed of VND 73 mil., 13 bags of clothes, working tools, and other household appliances.

2. Mr. Thao Seo Phe age 38 and Mr. Giang Seo Nech age 19 are both H’mong Christians. They currently live in Xa Phin, village Ban Lien, Bac Ha district, Lao Cai province. They reported that the provincial government since Feb. 15, 2005 has prevented them from gathering to worship God and force them to renounce their faith. More seriously, on April 17, 2006, Mr. Chang A Phu – vice president of Bac Ha district, Mr. Nong Sang – police of Ban Lien village, Vang A Thuong – the head of the police of Ban Lien, Mr. Bong – head of the security post, Mr. Thanh – a district officer, Mr. Vang A Su – secretary to the Communist Youth group, Mr. Giang Seo Chong – deputy secretary to the Communist Youth group, together with Mr. Phu A Vu, Mr. Giang Seo De, Mr. Cu Seo Van, Mr. Tiep and Mr. May, convened all the Christian families in the village from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. of April 18, 2006. They explained to the families that it is illegal to be a Christian and that being a Christian means supporting America. Then they forced the families to sign a commitment not to gather together and that they are only allowed to pray at home. Those who are found praying with others will be put into jail.

Four people did not sign the commitments, which are Mr. Thao Seo Phe, Giang Seo Nech, Sung Seo Di and Lau Seo Pao. Therefore, they were convened again on April 18, 2006 to the People’s Committee of the village. There, they were forced to renounce their faith but they resisted, thus they were beaten up inhumanely. They are kept in there until 15.30. Before releasing them, Mr. Nong Sang held Mr. Phe’s hand to force him to sign.

3. Ms. Le Thi Minh from hamlet 6, Thieu Vien village, Thieu Hoa district, Thanh Hoa province reported that she is in charge of the Full Gospel church in Thieu Vien, Thieu Hoa, Thanh Hoa. Her church has had gatherings for over 7 years. At 8 a.m. on April 23, 2006, while she was preparing for the service with some other believers, Mr. Hung – a police of hamlet 6 and Mr. Minh – deputy dead of Thieu Vien village came to prevent them from gathering. They then took all the church’s believers to the People’s Committee of the village and beat some believers on the way there. The village governmental officers threatened that they would have the young people in the village stone them.

4. Pastor Bui Hong Diep from Mong Cai, Quang Ninh said: in Mong Cai there are 3 churches with 200 believers who gather weekly to worship God. Last Sunday April 23, 2006, while the church was having the Holy Communion, the local governmental officers, religious committee and police came to stop the service, make report, and seize the Bible. They force the believers to dismiss. Pastor Diep said he and other believers will continue gathering next week.

5. Pastor Ho Xuan Vinh from the Full Gospel church in Qui Nhon, Binh Dinh province reported: in the evening April 14, 2006, while the church is having the special service on the Passion Week, the governmental officers, police, and soldiers of Qui Nhon city came to make reports, request them to dismiss, and tell them that they were having illegal activities. In the morning of Easter Sunday, they also came and force the believers to dismiss.

6. Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan from Hochiminh city reported: before the Easter day, the city Religious Committee requested the pastors to apply for having Easter services. The application should include information such as the name of the presider, the number of believers with their names and addresses. This is unnecessary and illegal.