

Testimony

MR. NGUYEN MAU TRINH, PRESIDENT NATIONAL CONGRESS OF VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA

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Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members of the Congressional

Human Rights Caucus, Ladies and Gentlemen, It is a great honor and privilege for me to appear before you today to testify to the situation of human rights in Vietnam. Since the religious question is going to be addressed by other witnesses more qualified than I in the matter, I would like to confine myself to the field of freedom of opinion, freedom of expression and freedom of the press all of which are of course interrelated.

The most recent report of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has this to say about the current situation of the press in Vietnam: "Hunkering down to defend the Communist Party as the country's sole voice of political power, Vietnam's Politburo continues to bar virtually all attempts at free expression that violate the guidelines of the party leadership. Vietnam's National Assembly amended and tightened an already repressive press law in June [1999], centralizing media control--including the Internet--within the Ministry of Culture and Information. The ministry has control over all media content and management; it licenses all journalists and media outlets and has complete authority to revoke those licenses for any reason."

It is thus clear that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has been and remains a totalitarian country as it has yet to abandon the idea that it can control and regulate not only every move of its citizens but also their thoughts. In August last year, Secretary General Le Kha Phieu of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) left no room for misunderstanding when he said in a widely publicized statement: "Our people won't allow any political power-sharing with any other forces. Any ideas to promote 'absolute democracy,' to put human rights above sovereignty, or support multi-party or political pluralism... are lies and cheating." But the very fact that the highest authority of the land had to call people to order like that, in a particularly jarring fashion amidst a world that is opening more and more to new ideas and globalization, also points to the regime's weakness. In January last year, retired General Tran Do, a former ideological chief but now a diabetic old man of 76, was expelled from the CPV after nearly 60 years of service. In March, the government launched a vicious campaign of vilification in the official media aimed at this one-time comrade of Ho Chi Minh, transforming him from a revered national hero in the anti-U.S. war to a traitor. When he applied for permission to start an independent newspaper in July, his request was rejected on the ground that the laws of Vietnam now do not allow for private media. General Tran Do at least got a reply from the authorities. When in September the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, a revered Buddhist leader and currently a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, citing the gross distortions of Buddhism found in the official textbooks used by the government, asked for the right to respond to these distortions through the publication of a monthly religious journal, the government does not even feel that it should care to answer such a legitimate request. But this movement pushing for press freedom is not going to disappear. The question has been raised by many voices before, including the 50-year veteran of the CPV, Mr. Nguyen Van Tran, who before his death last year wrote a book entitled, "To Mother and the General Assembly", in which he complained that there was more press freedom under the colonial rule of France than under the current regime. Most recently, the call for a free press has been raised by Mr. Hoang Tien, a writer, when he wrote a lengthy letter to the upcoming Vietnam Writers Association Sixth Congress asking for the same. But one does not have to go that far to see the limits that the government puts on freedom of opinion and expression in Vietnam. The case of Dr. Nguyen Thanh Giang, a world-famous geophysicist, is instructive. Because of his many writings which while constructive are nonetheless critical of the present directions of Vietnam, Dr. Giang has been a spine on the side of the Hanoi government. But because of his worldwide fame, he could not be handled roughly or summarily like any other dissident. On March 4, 1999, he was arrested on the street while on his way to the post office and charged with "illegal possession of documents inimical to the government" but in actuality, they were his own writings.

He went on a hunger strike but the authorities did not release him until May 10 after an international campaign was launched on his behalf. He remained under virtual house arrest and on