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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): I now call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the 75th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is June 4, 2015, and our meeting is being televised.

[English]

Colleagues, this is another meeting where we are looking at the human rights situation in Vietnam. We have two witnesses with us in the room today, Khue-Tu Nguyen, who's the commissioner for human rights for the Vietnamese Canadian Federation, and Thang Nguyen, the president and chief executive officer of Boat People SOS. Also with us by video conference from Los Angeles is Dieu Cay, a blogger.

If it's okay with the witnesses, we will simply take you in the order given here. I'm sure you've been briefed by our clerk that you should each give a relatively brief submission. I know that you have a lot to say, but once we've gone through all of the submissions, we'll then determine how much time is left and divide up the number of questions among the members of Parliament based on how much time we have.

Let's begin, then, with Ms. Nguyen, *s'il vous plaît*.

[Translation]

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen (Commissioner for Human Rights, Vietnamese Canadian Federation): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

[English]

As Mr. Chair has asked, we would like to start with Dr. Nguyen Thang's address first.

Dr. Thang Nguyen (President and Chief Executive Officer, Boat People SOS): Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the subcommittee.

Last year I appeared before the subcommittee to address the trafficking of Vietnamese workers in some 40 countries across the globe, such as Malaysia, Taiwan, Jordan, France, England, Cyprus, and even America, and Algeria, Ghana, and many other countries.

This form of modern day slavery is rooted in the Vietnamese government's official labour export program. Today I would like to address the broader issue of workers' rights in the context of the ongoing negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP, in which Canada is a negotiating partner.

In early 2014, we invited the mother of Do Thi Minh Hanh to testify before the U.S. Congress. Do Thi Minh Hanh is a labour union organizer. She was serving a prison sentence for her efforts to organize labour unions in Vietnam. That hearing and effective advocacy by labour unions galvanized close to 200 U.S. members of Congress to make the right of Vietnamese workers to form free and independent trade unions a major component of the TPP agreement.

Last month, even President Obama publicly stated that that is the precondition for Vietnam joining the TPP. Vietnam is the only TPP negotiating partner that outlaws free and independent labour unions. All organizers of independent labour unions in Vietnam have either been imprisoned or fled to other countries to avoid arrest.

Twelve months ago, we launched a campaign to make religious freedom an objective of TPP negotiations. On May 22, just a few weeks ago, the U.S. Senate passed the trade promotion authority, also known as fast track, with specific language that sets religious freedom as one of the trade negotiation's priorities.

We are urging the U.S. House of Representatives right now to adopt the same amendment. If signed into law, this will be the first time in U.S. history that religious freedom will be an objective of trade negotiations. This is particularly important because TPP will not be just another trade agreement, as its name implies; TPP will also send a message to the world that its members regard each other as trusted partners.

As such, TPP membership should not be extended to governments that brutally repress religion. The repression of religion is ongoing in Vietnam. Forced renunciation of faith is still commonplace in many provinces. Catholicism is practically outlawed in the three northern provinces of Dien Bien, Son La, and Lai Chau. Religious leaders and followers have been physically assaulted, or even tortured—some of them to death.

We estimate that some 150 to 200 people are currently in prison because of their faith. The Vietnamese national assembly is considering the country's first law on religion. Its current draft stipulates that all religious group activities, even in private homes, must be pre-registered with and approved by the government.

It will be hard for the U.S. government or any government in the free world to justify becoming a partner of such a repressive regime. I therefore urge the Canadian House of Commons through this committee to support our efforts to use the ongoing trade negotiations as leverage to promote human rights in Vietnam, particularly workers' rights to form free and independent labour unions and all citizens' rights to religious freedom. After all, trade should contribute to a better world and not strengthen the hands of tyrants.

Thank you.

• (1310)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Nguyen, would you like to give your presentation now?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Sure.

Thank you very much for this opportunity. We definitely appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. Last year we had the opportunity to testify with three former prisoners of conscience. We're very happy that we get to continue this dialogue today. We really appreciate this.

And thank you, Mr. Chair, for the introduction. I can now skip that.

To start, I would like to say that the mechanisms of suppression employed by the Government of Vietnam are very sophisticated, vast, and varied. It's truly disappointing, in that if they were to use their creativity and ingenuity for social progress instead of suppressing dissent, Vietnam wouldn't be the dystopian society it is for many today.

I have time to address only two points. As we said, we would like to keep this short in order to have more questions and ideas at the end.

On the two points, I would like to start by giving you the most recent examples. The first is the government's continued and increasing use of thugs to suppress and subdue dissidents. Lately, because there have been many, many photographs, with video-graphic evidence, of policemen and policewomen attacking dissidents, they have now resorted to the increased use of hired thugs to carry out these acts of violence in order for the government to distance itself from these acts of violence. If they're not actual thugs, then they're actually state policemen who are not in uniform but wearing civilian clothing.

I actually have one photograph here that is quite graphic. I would request that it be shown for only a few seconds, if that's okay.

Briefly, the man on the left is Nguyen Chi Tuyen, and the man on the right—there are two pictures of him—is Dinh Quang Tuyen. They were savagely beaten for their peaceful activism. The man on the right actually had his cranium smashed in.

As I was just walking into this very room today, I heard news of Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang in Saigon from just a few hours ago, or maybe last night. His face now looks no different from that of the man on the left you see right there. This goes to show you the escalating use of violence. It's no longer about hitting people in the back; it's hitting them in the head.

Thank you: we don't need to see this picture for too long.

Although what you see is gruesome, I think we can argue that the treatment of dissidents doesn't quite compare with the cruel treatment of citizens who are not dissidents, who are not under the watchful public eye, the protective eye, of the international community. If I may be very frank, every time I learn about what happens to people in Vietnam, I see more and more how the police there regard human life as having less value than an ant's—easily crushable, easily killable. I think one reason for this is that the performance evaluation of police officers in Vietnam is based on how many people they can find guilty, which leads to intense interrogation and torture, which in turn results in civilian deaths.

In fact, two days ago I learned that two uncles were sentenced to prison for 15 months because they decried the brutal killing of their 14-year-old nephew at the hands of police. I think this speaks volumes about the conscience, or I should I say the lack thereof, of a regime when two people who were very sad, who decried the brutal killing of a young loved one, were sentenced to prison for that, just that.

The important thing that I would like to remind all diplomats of is that as per the Vietnamese government's style of deceiving the international community to maintain its image of a government that is trying to improve, the government also creates fake civil societies, also known as government-operated non-governmental organizations, which is humorous, in a way. I call them "GONGOs". These fake civil societies meet with diplomats when they travel to the country, all meanwhile attacking real, genuine civil societies in the country. I must say that if they didn't need money from international trade or development, etc., they certainly would not bother with maintaining their international image.

• (1315)

I can go on with many examples, but I think I'll stop here.

The point I would like to emphasize is this. This totalitarian government does not hesitate to blatantly lie to the international community. Also, while it carries on its facade of improving its human rights record by, for example, releasing a small number of high-profile dissidents, which they do....

By the way, I should mention that they release many of the dissidents because they know the dissidents are on the verge of death, having been denied medical care in prison. So despite all that, they continue to arrest, imprison, and cause the "accidental" deaths of many more to prove they are a regime that is not to be questioned.

I think I'll end my remarks there.

We can move on, as you mentioned, Mr. Chair, to Mr. Nguyen Van Hai via video conference. He's a former prisoner of conscience who had been sentenced to 12 years in prison for his peaceful activism. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I gather there will be a translation at this point. Is that correct?

All right. Everybody should get their earpieces in place.

Thank you for your patience. We invite you to begin your testimony.

Mr. Dieu Cay (Blogger, As an Individual) (Interpretation):

Thank you for giving me the honour of addressing the Subcommittee on International Human Rights about the human rights situation in Vietnam today.

On the day I left Vietnam on October 21, 2014, as the plane took off I looked back at my own country, where I had spent so many days of hardship in communist prison and where many of my friends still continued their constant search for the freedom of my country, and I knew that I still had to continue the fight for many years so that I could one day return to my free and democratic native land.

I realized from that day that what I do will no longer be for me but for my fellow prisoners. I have to help them tell the world how the rights of Vietnamese citizens, especially in prison, are violated. I have to work so that everybody in my native land will enjoy the human rights specified in so many international conventions and agreements to which Vietnam itself has been a signatory.

Over the last six months I have met with many American personalities, from the Department of State to Senator Durbin, members of the House of Representatives, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and members of the media to ask them for help to gain the freedom of my friends and to let the world know about the extent of human rights violations in Vietnam.

Recently, on World Press Freedom Day I had the honour of meeting with President Obama, and I presented him with my wishes for press freedom in Vietnam. I also urged him to ask Vietnam to release all prisoners of conscience and to abrogate the ambiguous legislation that Vietnam has used to take away the rights to freedom of the Vietnamese people.

Ladies and gentlemen, today I would like to present three issues related to the human rights situation in Vietnam: one, freedom of the press and freedom of speech; two, prisoners of conscience; and three, labour unions in Vietnam and freedom of association.

• (1320)

In a totalitarian dictatorship like Vietnam, all municipal communications are under the control of the Communist authority. People would not dare express their political opinions for fear of arrest without trial, such as in the case of the Nhan Van Giai Pham affair, the anti-party revisionists, and many others resulting in an ever-increasing number of victims of illegal convictions.

Specifically in the case of the Free Journalists Club of Vietnam, to which I am a witness, we only expressed our opinions in a moderate manner on the Internet, yet we were arrested and condemned to prison sentences exceeding 10 years.

The Vietnam authority is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but they never implement it. They promulgate laws with ambiguous articles, such as article 258, article 88, article 79, and implement decree 72 for the purpose of convicting the dissenters and the people who fight for human rights. This is a blatant violation of article 19 of the ICCPR.

A state dictatorship governed by interest groups for individual gains, with rampant corruption, weakens the economy and causes discontent among the people, yet when the people voice their

dissatisfaction, the state uses all its various means and brutal tricks to silence them.

It is these ambiguous articles that the authority has used to arrest whoever expresses dissenting views and to protect the existence of the dictatorial regime. Only when the people can freely express their righteous views, without fear of suppression and imprisonment, can we have a society in which a life of freedom and happiness for all is guaranteed.

Vietnam has been integrating into the world. The first thing it must do is to abolish those ambiguous articles and return to the people the rights of freedom of expression and free press. Only then can Vietnam have true democracy.

• (1325)

Now I would like to address the second issue, which is the issue of the prisoners of conscience. Wherever there is power, there is a need for a mechanism to supervise power, but that mechanism is absent in Vietnam. In other words, Vietnam is truly a police state.

The police make arrests, manage detention centres, do investigations, assess evidence, and manage prisons. It is this absence of supervision that gives the police a free hand to make wrongful convictions, to force confessions, to use inhumane, barbaric, brutal torture in their investigations, causing death to hundreds of people. They usually say to the victims, "Your death only cost us one piece of paper." This shows the life and death power they have over the victims, because it is also the police who do the investigation, and the conclusion is always death by suicide. Indeed, it only cost them a piece of paper.

After six years, six months, and 11 days in communist prison, I realized that the communist brutality is even more horrible than I thought. To punish the prisoners of conscience, they will stop at nothing: public slander, prison cells with a slit only 30 cm. long for ventilation, and isolation cells with iron bars and corrugated iron roofs exposed to the scorching sun. This cell is an area of only 1.8 metres by 2 metres, including the toilet. On hot days we had to cover our faces with wet towels to survive the heat.

I learned that the more we comply with their orders, the more they make life harder for us. All rights of prisoners specified in the criminal law are ignored, specifically the right to counsel and the right to appeal. When we appeal to the procurator's office, it has to be done through the prison wardens, who naturally never forward the appeal. The prisoners are completely at the mercy of the wardens.

• (1330)

These rights are denied simply by the issuance of circulation 37 of the Ministry of Public Security, whose contents nobody knows. With this circulation, Vietnam security openly set up prisons within prisons for the prisoners of conscience, imposing isolation with no outside contacts.

This has prompted many prisoners to protest by hunger strikes. I went on a hunger strike twice, once for 28 days in camp B34 and the other for 33 days in camp number six of the Ministry of Public Security. This is the most barbaric prison system in Vietnam.

The latest news, which I just received a few moments ago, is about a friend of mine who was imprisoned in camp number five in Thanh Hoa. She has been on a hunger strike for 31 days and her health is deteriorating very quickly.

The Vietnam authority must immediately abolish circulation 37 of the Ministry of Public Security and amend the implementation legislation in accordance with the international covenant to which Vietnam is a signatory.

On the issues of labour union and freedom of association in Vietnam, my friend Dr. Thang Nguyen has just made a very good presentation, so there is no need for me to go into more detail. All I would like to know and to say right now is that we request that members of Parliaments and labour unions all over the world voice their concern so that workers in Vietnam can form unions to protect their interests.

We request that all of you condemn and demand the Vietnamese authority to abolish ambiguous articles 258, 88 and 79, decree 72, as well as circulation 37, according to the international covenant, and to release all prisoners of conscience in Vietnam.

● (1335)

I want to present to you a list of the prisoners of conscience requiring urgent assistance. At the head of the list is Ms. Ta Phong Tan, the lady I mentioned just a few minutes ago who is on a hunger strike and in poor health. Also on the list is Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, Nguyen Huu Vinh, Bui Thi Minh Hang, Tran Vu Anh Binh, Vo Minh Tri, Nguyen Dang Minh Man, Ho Thi Bich Khuong, Doan Van Vuon, Doan Dinh Nam, Doan Huy Chuong, and Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung.

I thank you very much for your attention and your concern about the human rights situation in Vietnam, with my very best wishes for your health.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, given the amount of time left—there's a clock on the wall, as you can see—we have time for a four-minute question and answer round per questioner.

My suggestion is that you pick a witness and direct your questions to that person. You stand the best chance of getting an answer, and possibly a supplementary question, if you do it that way.

Mr. Sweet, you may begin.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also wanted to ask the researchers if we could get a copy of the articles and resolutions that Mr. Dieu Cay was just referring to before we make any kind of statement, so that we understand the context of those he was speaking about.

The Chair: To follow up.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

My first question will be to the commissioner of human rights for Canada from the Vietnamese Canadian Federation.

One of the mandates you have is making sure there's harmony among the associations in Canada. How many are there, and how many are specifically human-rights-centric?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Do you mean our organizations under the umbrella of the Vietnamese Canadian Federation?

Mr. David Sweet: Yes.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: We have 11 member organizations.

● (1340)

Mr. David Sweet: How many of those are human-rights-centric?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: All of them are very pro human rights, and I believe all of them advocate for the promotion of human rights.

Mr. David Sweet: And it's your job to make sure they operate effectively and to keep harmony among them all.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: It's my job, mainly for human rights in Vietnam. What they do at their local chapters is what they do. I can certainly provide assistance.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Actually, if you don't mind, I would like to state that we do have four recommendations. If there is no time, I understand, but if you would like to hear our recommendations, I would be happy to tell you. It's up to you.

Mr. David Sweet: I'll just ask Mr. Dieu Cay a question first before that, considering my limited amount of time.

The Chair: Yes. Let's do that.

We'll make sure you don't leave the room without having given your four recommendations. It might be at the end, but it will be done.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Thank you very much.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Dieu Cay, I found it fascinating that you would wish us good health. I can't imagine the struggle you've been through in incarceration.

I wanted to ask you, as someone who has publicly confronted the government, why you think they would have released you and then allowed you to travel as well.

Mr. Dieu Cay (Interpretation): I think this is due mainly to the victory of the campaign, the world campaigns, the members of Parliament, and the international organizations that fight for the freedom of the prisoners. I think that if we continue, even when we may not have an immediate result, your voice and your concern do lend more strength to the people who are still in prison. We hope we can continue to step up this campaign so that you can bring a better result in the future.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, is there any time left?

The Chair: Unfortunately, there is not.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We go to Mr. Marston next.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): I want to welcome our guests here today, because this is a very significant and important topic.

One point I'd like to make to the chair is that we have the option of a report, but we also have the option of a statement. The request we had concerning the list of people who are imprisoned and at risk could possibly be addressed separately, not as part of a report. We could be actionable a little bit sooner, if that's what people would like to do. It's just a thought.

The Chair: We've done that before, of course, not with Vietnam but with other countries.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I think there's a certain level of importance to responding to that as immediately as we can. Sorry to interrupt the actual questioning.

There's a wealth of things to talk about, but one of the things I noticed, and a couple of us did, was that when he showed the pictures of the injured individuals, wasn't one of them a pastor who spoke to this committee once before, Pastor Hung?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: No, these are different people.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Oh, it wasn't? Good. Well, that provides a certain sense of relief, because we were wondering.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: There are so many who have the same bloodied face, I wouldn't blame you for getting them confused.

Mr. Wayne Marston: The other thing is that several of the comments centred around labour rights. I was a labour leader for 28 years, and I'm pleased to say that within Canada we have the right to express concern. I do think that's a very reasonable vehicle. It was used in South Africa to a great extent too.

Also, you talked about using the TPP and the trade agreements to achieve it. We have agreements with Honduras and Colombia to which there are side agreements concerning human rights and labour laws. Would you not agree that it's crucially important that they be codified in the actual agreement?

•(1345)

Dr. Thang Nguyen: Yes. This is very important because, first of all, Vietnam now needs the TPP more than Canada or the U.S. needs Vietnam.

Secondly, there ought to be enforceable mechanisms built into the TPP to monitor and also enforce the commitments of Vietnam. We know of many preceding cases in which Vietnam made a promise but didn't keep the promise.

Right now there's an agreement on labour rights in the TPP. That's what we have been told. We haven't been able to read it yet. Who has? However, we have also been told that there's no mechanism for enforcing it or for monitoring Vietnam's compliance with its commitments. That's why we are working very hard right now to build that into the TPP, and I see that as our last chance to really improve the conditions of workers in Vietnam.

Mr. Wayne Marston: To our guest by video conference, did you have access to your own counsel when you were imprisoned?

Mr. Dieu Cay (Interpretation): During all the time I was imprisoned, twice, and was under trial, they imposed a lot of

obstacles on me accessing my counsel, my lawyer. Even when the trial was taking place, I could not even access the help of a lawyer.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I believe that's my time.

The Chair: That is it, unfortunately.

We go now to Ms. Grewal, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, witnesses, for your time and your presentations.

Vietnam's government continues to violate a broad range of human rights. There are approximately 220,000 people of Vietnamese heritage in Canada. The Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development reports that Canada and Vietnam maintain good bilateral relations. But these continuing testimonies of Vietnam violating the human rights of its citizens are very startling.

In your opinion, how much of the problem in Vietnam can be attributed to corruption?

Dr. Thang Nguyen: Corruption is part of the problem, the bigger, major issue facing Vietnam because there's no civil society. There are no watchdog organizations.

As a matter of fact just recently a reporter—actually he's the chief editor of a state-owned magazine—exposed corruption and now is standing trial for disclosing national security information. And he is not the only one. There are many other reporters who have served sentences because they exposed high-level graft in government.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Allegations have been raised that Vietnam restricts and tortures peaceful protesters, as you showed to us in the pictures. Are there particular kinds of protesters that the government targets and is there a reason why the government would target particular protesters?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: As with many totalitarian dictatorship regimes, they concentrate their energy in mainly targeting the high-profile figureheads and the source of inspiration for the people, because those are the people who are able to get a lot of people to rise up and speak their minds.

However, they don't just target the sources of inspiration but also people who are not in the public eye at all, people who are farmers, people who are in rural areas. The sad thing is that not many people know about them and that's why we're trying to get many people to support not only bloggers and journalists, who perhaps the international community knows more about because they write online and are more accessible to the world, but also those who have very little means of communicating with the outside world.

I hope that answers your question.

•(1350)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Yes. Thank you very much. It does.

Dr. Thang Nguyen: May I answer very quickly?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Yes.

Dr. Thang Nguyen: There are three basic freedoms that form the cornerstone of civil society. The Vietnamese government views civil society as a potential threat to its monopoly of power.

The first freedom is freedom of expression. If you can spread the words, if you can share your ideas, that could be infectious. Two is the freedom of peaceful assembly and, three, is the freedom of association, because we come together and become a strength and influence.

Therefore, we have observed people who have tried to exercise those three basic freedoms of theirs who have been tortured and sentenced to death.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Canada is a part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, which also includes Vietnam.

Ms. Nguyen, what would you consider to be an acceptable human rights condition for Canada and Vietnam to agree upon?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: I think first and foremost would be the unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience. We need to get them out.

Another important one is to get rid of all the vague articles in Vietnam's penal code that criminalize peaceful dissent, because they use those articles to say these guys are criminals when they're not.

I think another third one Dr. Nguyen might want to address now.

Dr. Thang Nguyen: Yes, and that is workers' rights, the right of all workers in Vietnam to form their own free and independent labour unions.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In your opinion do you think the ordinary—

The Chair: I hate to do this, but I have to cut you off. You've gone past four minutes.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: That's okay.

The Chair: I'm sorry about that.

Just to be clear, when you say “civil society”, you effectively are using that as meaning organizations that are non-governmental. Would that be correct?

Dr. Thang Nguyen: That's correct. I'm talking about the genuine grouping of citizens and individuals in society to address their own issues and problems, and also to change the social rules that govern society. But that is not being allowed in Vietnam.

Only the GONGOs are allowed in Vietnam. They are created by government to deceive the world that there is a civil society, which doesn't exist in Vietnam.

The Chair: Thank you for that clarification.

Professor Cotler, please.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I also want to commend the witnesses for their informed and graphic testimony on matters relating to the assault on fundamental freedoms, on trade union rights, and not only political prisoners but also the plight of those who are political prisoners in terms of torture, forced confessions, and the like.

As was mentioned as well, you've characterized the Vietnam government as being a totalitarian government, as being a dictatorial regime, which leads to my question then. How can international pressure be effective on a totalitarian regime using, for example, the

fundamental freedoms issue that you mentioned, freedom of speech, press, assembly and association?

And I have a specific question I would put to Dieu Cay and that is how can that be effective in securing the release from prison of your colleague, Ta Phong Tan, who is now, as you mentioned, on a hunger strike? Those are my two questions.

Dr. Thang Nguyen: To address the first question, Vietnam today is no longer the Vietnam that existed back in the 1970s. It has opened its door to the world, because it needs to survive economically. Starting last year, when China erected an oil rig in the South China Sea—which is part of Vietnamese territorial waters—Vietnam became very lonely politically because China was its only ally up until then.

They have no allies right now. That's why they're looking out to the western world, especially the U.S. and Canada, and other countries. That's why they want to be part of the TPP so much, and that is where you have leverage. They need the TPP, they need trade, they need security, and they need partnership with other countries. They will make commitments and promises that they don't truly have the intention of upholding or implementing, but that's the second step. That's why we need to build a civil society that can force the government to comply with its commitments under international treaties and covenants. Those are the two steps that have to go hand in hand.

We did see some improvements wherever we tried those dual approaches with Vietnam.

• (1355)

Mr. Dieu Cay (Interpretation): Sir, I think we could request that the Parliament of Canada pass a resolution asking for the release of all prisoners of conscience, especially in the case of Ms. Ta Phong Tan. Her case is special because she was my fellow activist, and the things we did were very similar. She has been in prison for a long time, and in her cause her mother has committed suicide by self-immolation in protest of the government's action. I think if the government of Canada passes a resolution, makes it a high profile case, and appeals to other communities to join, that would be a very effective means to address the issues.

Furthermore, it would be a great idea if Canada, the United States, and European countries made up and publicize a list of all the prison wardens who have committed brutalities and atrocities, make it public, make each of them *persona non grata* and forbid them from entering those countries.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to our next questioner, Mr. Hillyer.

Mr. Jim Hillyer (Lethbridge, CPC): Ms. Nguyen, you said that in addition to bloggers, writers, and journalists, they have also been targeting obscure farmers and people like that. Why?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: It's part of their land expropriation. They take lands away from their proper owners. Although I only mentioned bloggers, journalists, farmers, and those in rural areas, they also target religious leaders as well—and not even leaders, but participants of non-state-sanctioned religious organizations. That goes against freedom of religion. So they target anyone and anything that in any way expresses their voice or in any way expresses any opinion contrary to that of the communist party of Vietnam. It's not just farmers and bloggers, it's anybody.

• (1400)

Mr. Jim Hillyer: Okay. In the *Gulag Archipelago*, the regime would target pretty much anyone just to create a state of fear so that you wouldn't know whom you could trust, so you could not even secretly associate, it seems. Does that go on as well?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Yes, very much so. It's really disappointing to see that in the 21st century this is still happening in places in the world like Vietnam. To speak from a personal point of view, in class I learned a lot about the dystopian societies, and we read a lot of these novels that are fictitious, they're not real. However, when you read them, you definitely see parallels to what happens in Vietnam in this totalitarian regime. It's like a work of fiction but it's unfortunately not.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: You also talked about state-sanctioned religious organizations. Are there religious organizations that the state is okay with?

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: It's because they are controlled by the state themselves; they're not independently organized.

Dr. Thang Nguyen: I will add that in Vietnam right now all religious activities or organizations must be registered with the government and approved by the government. They have used this requirement for two purposes. One is to crowd out and neutralize.... Actually, they have outlawed and banned many of the churches, including the largest religion in Vietnam, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. That's the largest. It remains outlawed to this day.

In place of that, they register and approve a state-sanctioned church they created, and in many cases they appoint communist cadres to serve in the leadership of those churches, to control those churches. Then they will take the land, the properties, the temples, and the churches from the outlawed ones and pass them and transfer them over to the one controlled by the government. To the outside world it looks like there are churches, there are religions, there are religious activities, but they're all controlled by the government.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: Do the people who are going to the church of their choice have any sense at all that the churches represent their faith? Do they even show up?

Dr. Thang Nguyen: Many people choose not to go to those churches; therefore, there's a movement of house churches in Vietnam, and they have been severely, brutally suppressed. For instance, between 2001 and 2004 alone over 4,000 house churches of the Protestant Montagnard mountain people, an ethnic minority indigenous people, were burned, destroyed, or closed down, and very few have opened up now, only those that are allowed by government and actually run by the government. A number of Montagnard have tried to continue to stick together and conduct

house churches, but with the new law that wouldn't even be allowed because they must register and be pre-approved by the government.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Another way that the government tries to show that it's trying to improve is this new decree 92, where it says that outlawed church organizations can register if they want. However, in order to be able to register, they need to have been already approved by the government for 10 or 20 years. It puts these non-state-sanctioned religious organizations in a catch-22 situation, so it's for naught, that decree 92.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hillyer.

Mr. Benskin, please.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you, and please let me add my voice welcoming you back.

Thank you, Mr. Dieu Cay, for your very in-depth and moving testimony. My question is for you. We have heard a number of witnesses speaking to the hunger strikes that are either ongoing now or that people engaged in before, you and a gentleman that we had for previous testimony, your friend who is undergoing a hunger strike at this moment. To me, it seems a very internal thing, because we don't hear about it unless individuals like you come to us.

I guess that's where the bloggers come in. Is there an estimate of how many bloggers are dedicated to the human rights situation in Vietnam and how many of those might be in Vietnam at this point?

• (1405)

Mr. Dieu Cay (Interpretation): Sir, as we have said, the communication and information system is completely under the control of the government, so it is impossible to print or distribute news not approved by the government.

We have to depend mainly on what we call the social network and also the cyber-network. For instance, in my case, when I was on a hunger strike, they completely isolated me in prison. No one knew about my hunger strike. Only when a family member happened to be visiting me and the news leaked out did the other bloggers begin to propagate the news.

Also, in the case of my friend who is imprisoned in Thanh Hoa, at 5 o'clock this morning a blogger sent the news that he had received from the brother of my friend, who had gone to visit her and discovered she was on a hunger strike and that her health had deteriorated. The bloggers could spread that news to the public.

• (1410)

At the moment in Vietnam there are about six million bloggers, and if only 1% of those bloggers cared about that kind of news and about the issues of freedom of expression and freedom of association, then I think we would have 60,000 bloggers to spread the news.

In addition to that, we have 25 million people using Facebook in Vietnam. If 1% of those people used that medium to pass on information, then we would have 250,000 people to spread the news. This is why for us, as I have said before in my presentation and want to stress it again, we would like to appeal to the Parliament of Canada and also other international agencies to make the issues of freedom of the press one of the key issues in their approach to helping us overcome the practice of violation of human rights in Vietnam.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That concludes the time we have for questions from members, and given the time, some of you may have to leave. But I want to give Ms. Nguyen the chance to go through the four suggestions she had.

Ms. Nguyen.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll make it really brief and just list the four recommendations. Thank you for the time.

Our first one concerns adopting a prisoner of conscience. Our first recommendation is for the sub-committee to canvas for parliamentarians who would be willing to participate in this "adopt a prisoner of conscience" project. By adopt we mean that one parliamentarian would follow the circumstances of one imprisoned activist and make sure that he or she is treated decently in prison so as, first, to protect them while they are in prison and in the long term call for their unconditional release.

In short, that's what one can do. We can definitely provide you with a list of such prisoners of conscience, and we'll subtract those who have already been "adopted" by your counterparts in the United States and Germany and in Australia. This has already been done; it's already rolling.

Our second recommendation is for the sub-committee to request a report from the office of the Ambassador for Religious Freedom, Ambassador Andrew Bennett, whom Dr. Nguyen and Dr. Le and I

had the privilege of meeting with yesterday, to be updated on the situation of religious freedoms in Vietnam.

Our third recommendation is to call for legal reforms in Vietnam, as has already been mentioned numerous times, to remove vague articles in the penal code that are used to criminalize peaceful dissent.

Our final recommendation pertains to the TPP, which Dr. Nguyen has addressed thoroughly for you.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Yes, I'd invite you to get a list of names to our clerk. I might suggest that you not to eliminate the names of those who have been paired with legislators elsewhere, but rather submit them to us along with the information as to who they've been paired with. That would be very helpful.

• (1415)

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you to all of our witnesses today, both those who are here in person and our one witness from Los Angeles. We're very grateful indeed that you could be here, as well as members of the community.

I'm afraid I don't know the name of the translator, but thank you. We have translators of various levels of competence, and you've been particularly good. We're very grateful indeed that you were there to help us along.

And yes, Mr. Dewar, the opposition foreign affairs critic is here as well.

Thank you very much, everybody.

Given the time, we are now adjourned.

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