

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 23, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We are writing to express grave concern about your Administration's decision to ease the ban on sales of lethal military equipment to the Government of Vietnam. We strongly urge you to reconsider it or to delay the delivery of any security services and equipment under this new policy until the Government of Vietnam has substantially improved its human rights record.

We support efforts by the United States to help our partners and allies address concerns about China's aggressive territorial claims in the Asia Pacific maritime domains. However, we believe that such security cooperation, especially with governments like Vietnam's with a stubbornly poor human rights record, should be predicated upon progress towards respect of basic individual freedoms.

Vietnam has made progress in a few limited areas since Congress normalized trade relations in 2006. Unfortunately, these steps fall well short of the promises made in 2006 that greater economic relations would spur meaningful political openness in Vietnam. Vietnam is an authoritarian, one-party state, and its authorities severely restrict freedoms of association, opinion, and the press, including tightly limiting access to the Internet and telecommunications. There are also serious and ongoing concerns about the use of torture by Vietnam's public security forces.

As the Administration made new efforts to improve relations with Vietnam between 2011 and 2013, the number of Vietnamese citizens arrested or convicted for peaceful speech or political activity increased. There are more prisoners in detention today than at any time in recent history, and the number of prisoners released this year is outnumbered by the number of new detainees. Most releases in 2014 were conditional, and most of the prisoners were terminally ill or in poor health. Meanwhile, over 150 other Vietnamese convicted for free speech acts in recent years remain in prison, including high profile cases, like Le Quoc Quan, Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, Nguyen Van Hai, Father Ly, and Ta Phong Tan.

Vietnam also remains a country in which there is little freedom of religion. While registrations of houses of worship has increased, continuing to demand such state registration is a flagrant violation of international standards, and numerous churches which do not register, or cannot register, remain illegal. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom continues to recommend that Vietnam be listed as a Country of Particular Concern.

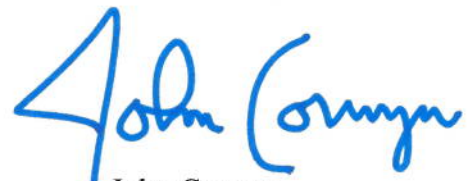
The U.S. has an interest in helping Vietnam improve its maritime defense capabilities, but such efforts will only be sustainable if accompanied by a verifiable commitment from the Vietnamese authorities to substantially improve their human rights record. Such commitment could include the unconditional release of all independent journalists, bloggers, and democracy and labor activists; as well as the repeal of laws criminalizing peaceful dissent, such as articles 79, 87, 88, 89, 91, and 258. Another positive signal by Vietnam would be to return estates and properties confiscated from churches and religious communities, and a verifiable end to the use of tax laws to prosecute the government's critics.

We urge you to reconsider your decision and to ensure that easing the arms embargo is tied to specific progress on human rights and political reform in Vietnam. We stand ready to work with you to design a sustainable policy toward Vietnam that better advances the democratic aspirations of the Vietnamese people as well as our strategic interests.

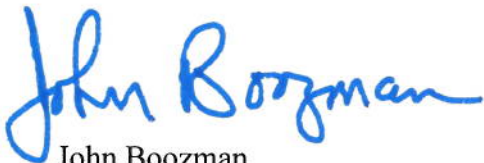
Sincerely,



Marco Rubio
United States Senator



John Cornyn
United States Senator



John Boozman
United States Senator



David Vitter
United States Senator