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## **VIETNAM | Joint Political Statement Acknowledges Human Rights Concerns**

U.S. President Barack Obama and Vietnam's Communist Party leader, Nguyen Phu Trong, approved a joint statement about the “deepening” partnership between the two countries, which acknowledged human rights concerns, following meetings at the White House this week.

The statement includes a pledge to continue “support for the promotion and protection of human rights and support the maintenance of positive, frank, and constructive dialogue on human rights.” In addition, the U.S. “welcomes Vietnam's ratification of the Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” and Vietnam's ongoing efforts to harmonize its laws with its 2013 Constitution and international commitments.

Vietnam's human rights record continues to face criticism from civil society groups both inside and outside the country, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). The meetings in Washington, D.C. come two weeks after Vietnamese civil society organizations (CSOs), including Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Buddhist faith-based groups, published a statement on the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture on June 26, alleging that Vietnamese police, public security agents and thugs “beat citizens rampantly even in the daytime.” A report by 24 independent Vietnamese CSOs draws attention to human rights abuses in Vietnam in 2014, including violations against the right to freedom of religion or belief. The report covers the prohibition of worship and (religious) gatherings, the beating of religious clerks, monks and believers, and the demolition of religious facilities.

Earlier this year, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief issued a report which identifies “a number of serious problems” concerning religious freedom in Vietnam, including legal and administrative restrictions and a “generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practicing religions or beliefs that are not registered.”

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “While the inclusion of a pledge to protect human rights in the US and Vietnam is a potentially positive step, it must be supported by genuine efforts to strengthen human rights protection in law and in practice. The reports by the UN's foremost expert on freedom of religion or belief, taken together with those issued by civil society organizations inside the country, serve to highlight some of the significant and ongoing human rights concerns still prevalent in Vietnam.”

“As the two countries seek to develop their strategic and economic partnership, human rights,

and the protection of freedom of religion or belief, must not be reduced to a footnote. Vietnam, like the US, has obligations under international law concerning the right to freedom of religion or belief. Yet although there have been some improvements in recent years, full religious freedom has yet to become a reality for many individuals and communities in Vietnam, including ethnic minority Protestants and Catholics,” Thomas said. “We urge the US and Vietnam to ensure that the commitments made in this statement are put into action. In particular, we call on Vietnam to ensure that legislation concerning religious activities is revised to comply with international standards on religious freedom, and ensures that the rights of independent religious communities are fully protected.”