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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Human Rights: Vietnam

SPEECH

Monday, 17 June 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Kelly, Craig, MP

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Mr CRAIG KELLY (Hughes) (12:53): I rise to support the motion moved by the member for Fowler and I congratulate him on it. His motion states:

That this House:

(1) notes that:

(a) on 16 May 2013 two young activists, Nguyen Phuong Uyen, age 21, and Dinh Nguyen Kha, age 25, were sentenced to six and eight years, respectively, in jail by the People's Court of Long An province in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam;

(b) the two activists were arrested for distributing literature protesting against China's claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea; and

(c) there are credible reports from various international agencies of continuing human rights violations in Vietnam which is evidenced by the high number of house detentions and imprisonment for people engaged in activities as basic as expressing views contrary to the Vietnamese Government's position; and

(2) calls on the Australian Government to:

(a) refer the matters of Nguyen Phuong Uyen and Dinh Nguyen Kha, and other issues concerning human rights in Vietnam that have been raised in the Australian Parliament, to the next round of the Australia-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue; and

(b) continue to take appropriate steps to convey to the Vietnamese Government that Australia expects Vietnam to honour its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Although Vietnam's economy has made many great strides over recent years, its record on human rights remains extremely poor. Today the socialist government of Vietnam virtually suppresses all forms of political dissent using a broad array of repressive measures. Freedom of expression and association and even public assembly are tightly controlled. Religious activists are harassed, intimidated and imprisoned. The criminal justice system lacks independence and operates under the direction of the government and the communist party. Vietnam's authoritarian penal code prohibits public criticism of the government and the Vietnamese communist party. We know that in 2012 at least 40 people were known to have been convicted and sentenced to prison merely for peaceful dissent, an increase on the number from 2011. And in the first five months of this year we have seen more than 50 people convicted in political show trials, more than the number for the whole of 2012.

That brings us to the case of Nguyen Phuong Uyen and Dinh Nguyen Kha. Nguyen Phuong Uyen, at just 21 years of age, was a student at Ho Chi Minh University of Food Industry. The police arrested her on 14 October 2012 in Ho Chi Minh City and took her to the police station without even informing her family. Her family and friends then launched an extensive search for her by making inquiries of that very police station and alerting the public via non-state channels, including the BBC and Radio Free Asia. It was not until eight days after she had gone missing that an officer at that police station told her mother that she had actually been transferred to the police in Long An Province. On 23 October the Long An police acknowledged that she had been charged with 'conducting propaganda against the state' under article 88 of Vietnam's penal system. According to the indictment, Nguyen Phuong Uyen was officially arrested on 19 October, leaving five days during which her whereabouts were unaccounted for by officials. Her mother claims that on a visit on 26 April she saw many bruises on her daughter's neck, her upper chest and her arms. Her mother said that she told her that she was beaten and kicked severely in the stomach by guards in detention and that it was only when she fainted that the prison guards stopped the beating and took her to see a doctor.

Following these sentences, the Asia director of Human Rights Watch noted:

Putting people on trial for distributing leaflets critical of the government is ridiculous and shows the insecurity of the Vietnamese government ...

Writing things that do not please the government is only a crime in a dictatorship. Vietnam should stop using politically-controlled courts to convict critics of the government.

The US embassy also issued a strong statement last month in light of these sentences handed down. It said:

We are concerned by a Vietnamese court's sentencing of Dinh Nguyen Kha to eight years in prison and Nguyen Phuong Uyen to six years in prison on subversion charges.

These convictions are part of a disturbing trend of Vietnamese authorities using charges under national security laws to imprison government critics for peacefully expressing their political views.

These actions are inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression and, thus, Vietnam's obligation under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and commitments reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We call on the government to release prisoners of conscience and allow all Vietnamese to peacefully express their political views.

That is the message from the US embassy.

This is not the only case. I was very glad to hear the member for Holt raise the case of the Roman Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly, also known as Father Thaddeus, who was detained for so-called spreading of propaganda against the state. What incentives are there currently for the Vietnamese socialist government to make changes to improve their human rights on record? It is all very well for us to come in here and make these well-intentioned motions, but we have to back it up with action. It is worthwhile noting that, as we are sitting here speaking in favour of this motion, our government is giving \$160 million to the very same Vietnamese government that we are criticising to build a bridge across the Mekong River. I am sure this bridge will facilitate trade and economic growth in that region, but what message are we sending when our nation borrows \$160 million that we do not have and gifts it to the Vietnamese government? How can that Vietnamese government take motions like this seriously when we are giving such generous gifts?

Of course, us gifting them \$160 million to build up their heavy infrastructure leaves the Vietnamese government free to spend their money elsewhere. So it is no surprise that what we have seen over recent years is a massive increase in Vietnamese military spending. Vietnam already spends more on defence as a proportion of GDP than all its South-East Asian neighbours—of course, except Singapore—spend. In December 2011, Hanoi signed a contract with Russia's defence export agency for two additional Durapart Corvettes. This follows the acceptance of two of the last four patrol boats in October. Confirmation was provided by senior Vietnamese military officials in mid 2011 that Hanoi had ordered six Kilo class submarines for 2013 to 2016—and it has begun to take delivery—as well as ordering 12 Sukhoi Su-30MKK fighter aircraft. These Soviet-made advance fighter aircraft cost \$30 million a pop. Rather than our government giving the Vietnamese government \$160 million to build a bridge, why don't we cut out the middleman and give them five Soviet fighter aircrafts instead? If we are going to be serious, we have to be a very loud voice against what the Vietnamese government is doing. Sometimes, with our foreign aid programs, we just cannot isolate the two.

In my remaining time, I would also like to commend the comments from the member for Cowan, who commented on the enormous contribution that the Vietnamese community have made to Australia through their entrepreneurial culture. To get the best economic advancement for that country, the socialist government of Vietnam must protect human rights and it must guarantee freedom of speech. If it can release the entrepreneurial spirit that we have seen from the Vietnamese community, the country of Vietnam has a great future. It will not do that while it continues to suppress human rights, while it continues to suppress free speech and while it continues to suppress religious liberty. We owe it to the people of Vietnam and to our local Vietnamese community to use our voice as loudly as we can to express our outrage against these violations by the Vietnamese government.