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Letter to U.S. President Barack Obama:

90 International personalities and CSOs call for the immediate and unconditional release of Vietnamese prisoner, Buddhist monk and dissident Thich Quang Do

Paris-Bergen, 17 November 2015 - As U.S. President Barack Obama arrives in Southeast Asia this week, ninety (90) international personalities and civil society organizations worldwide have signed a letter urging the President to press for the release of Vietnam's most longstanding prisoner of conscience, **Thich Quang Do**, leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and prominent human rights defender.¹

Initiated by the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (Paris) and the Rafto Foundation (Norway), together with Amnesty International, FIDH, Civil Rights Defenders, World Movement for Democracy, Lantos Foundation, PEN International, People in Need Foundation and Agir Ensemble pour les Droits de l'Homme, the letter's 90 signatories include Nobel Peace Prize laureates **Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, Mairead Maguire** and **Tawakkol Karman**, religious figures such as **Mons. Vaclav Maly**, Bishop of Prague, **Fr. José Raúl Vera López**, Bishop of Saltillo Mexico, **Mgr Bulambo Lembelembe Josué** of the DR of Congo, academics, writers, journalists, legislators, 23 members of the European Parliament, **Lord Avebury, Baroness Berridge** and **Lord Alton** of the UK House of Lords, numerous Rafto Prize laureates, human rights defenders and democracy activists from all over the globe.

The letter is sent to President Obama as he makes a landmark visit to the Philippines and Malaysia to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit and the U.S.-ASEAN and East Asia Summits, where he will meet with Vietnamese leaders. This is a symbolic year for the U.S. and Vietnam, as it marks 20 years of U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic relations and the 40th Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.

Human rights are the signatories' major concern. In Vietnam today, religious leaders, civil society activists and bloggers face daily harassments and intimidation from the authorities simply for peacefully expressing their views, and have no legal framework to protect them, at the same time as the country seeks to strengthen economic and security ties with the U.S, they wrote.

The signatories stress that U.S.-Vietnam relations are only sustainable if they are founded on the mutual respect of democratic freedoms and fundamental human rights including the freedoms of expression, association, religion or belief and movement. The release of Thich Quang Do, they

¹ See *Viet Nam: Prisoner of conscience Thich Quang Do must be released*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa41/2898/2015/en/>.

said, would be a “*truly historic gesture*” that would “*give Vietnam the opportunity to demonstrate its willingness for progress, and reaffirm the United States’ determination to make human rights the cornerstone of this strengthened relationship*”.

Thich Quang Do is leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), a renowned spiritual leader, scholar, dissident and 16-times Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Thich Quang Do (87) has spent more than three decades in detention for his peaceful advocacy of religious freedom, democracy and human rights. For protesting the creation of a State-sponsored Buddhist Church, in 1982, he was sent into internal exile in northern Vietnam for ten years along with his mother, who died of cold and hunger in the harsh environment. In 1995, he was sentenced to five years in prison for *organising a rescue mission for flood victims in the Mekong Delta*.

Released in 1998 due to international pressure, Thich Quang Do was placed under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). His communications are monitored and he is denied freedom of movement and citizenship rights. From house arrest, Thich Quang Do continues to press Vietnam to embrace democratic pluralism and respect all human rights for all.

For more information:

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