31 July 2014

Senator Bob Corker
Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
SD-185 Dirksen Bldg
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Corker,

I am writing to you from Christian Solidarity Worldwide, an advocacy organisation working for freedom of religion or belief for all, with reference to the visit of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to Vietnam next week.

As I am sure you are aware, the United National Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Professor Heiner Bielefeldt, recently visited Vietnam from 21-31 July. The visit was cut short after individuals Professor Bielefeldt planned to meet were “intimidated, harassed or prevented from travelling by the police”, according to the Special Rapporteur’s press statement, issued on 31 July in Hanoi. This in itself may be taken as a reflection of the pressure on religious communities who attempt to advocate for greater freedom of religion or belief.

In the same statement, the Special Rapporteur made reference to some of the obstacles to the enjoyment of this right in Vietnam, including the “generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practising religion outside of the established channels”, the lack of specificity around the terms “majority interests” and “social order” and broad limitation clauses concerning human rights, as well as “vague formulations within the Penal Code […] concerning the ‘abuse’ of democratic freedoms”, and the “absence of sufficiently efficient and accessible legal recourse”.

CSW shares the Special Rapporteur’s concerns about these obstacles, and about continuing reports of violations against religious communities including Catholics, Montagnard Protestants, other Protestants, Khmer Krom Buddhists, Khmer Krom Protestants, Cham Muslims, Caodaiists, Hoa Hao Buddhists and followers of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

On the occasion of the visit of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to Vietnam, we encourage the delegation to meet with victims of religious freedom violations and with representatives of religious organisations. We also recommend that the delegation consider visiting some members of these religious communities who are currently in detention in connection with the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs, or for their advocacy for greater religious freedom.
In addition, we respectfully request that the delegation raise the concerns of human rights organisations, religious leaders, Vietnamese lawyers and the UN Special Rapporteur regarding Decree 92/2012/ND-CP, ‘On details and directive measures for the implementation of the Ordinance on Religions and Belief’, which came into effect in January 2013. CSW shares the concerns of those who have criticised Decree 92 for its use of vague and ambiguous terminology, and for introducing new bureaucratic obstacles to the peaceful and lawful activities of religious believers.

We hope that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will take this opportunity to raise key concerns about violations of, and obstacles to, the right to freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam.

Yours sincerely,

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive

Christian Solidarity Worldwide