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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Dear colleagues,

[English]

I'm going to begin this meeting right now and address an issue while our witnesses take their seats, and then I'll do introductions, because we have to deal with an administrative matter.

[Translation]

We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is May 29, 2014, and this is our 30th meeting.

[English]

We are looking into the human rights situation in Vietnam. We have some witnesses, who I'll introduce in a moment. We'll be having a video presentation as well, as part of this presentation. We're televised, of course.

I have to start by making an apology to everybody. There will apparently be a vote in the House of Commons that will interrupt our proceedings here. The rules require me to suspend as soon as the bells start ringing, unless there is unanimous consent of the committee to continue onwards. Therefore, I propose, and you can accept this or reject it at your discretion, that when the bells start ringing—and they are 30-minute bells—that we continue sitting until we have some period left—I'm going to suggest five minutes—at which point I will terminate what's happening. I'll probably start giving you a heads-up at 10 minutes so anybody who has to leave can do so, but we're not very far away.

Is that acceptable?

Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Absolutely not.

I thought about this, because I knew we were going to have this issue. My suggestion would be, for fairness, that we agree unanimously to allow the testimony to be read into the record. If we get into questions, it's going to be such a short period of time that somebody is going to be robbed of some questioning time.

The Chair: Okay. Will we show the videos or not show them?

Mr. David Sweet: No. I mean all the testimony. I think the main thing is to get the testimony in.

The Chair: All right. Let's begin this then.

Thank you, colleagues, for that.

For those who didn't see what just happened, we have agreed that even though the bells will start ringing and we have to go for a vote, we'll have your testimony.

I want to start by sincerely apologizing to you for the fact that a circumstance beyond our control has occurred, which will shorten this particular meeting.

We have as witnesses with us today Can D. Le, who is the commissioner for external affairs for the Vietnamese Canadian Federation; Khue-Tu Nguyen, who is the commissioner for human rights for the Vietnamese Canadian Federation; and Thang D. Nguyen, who is the president and chief executive officer of Boat People SOS.

Additionally, there is some video footage from individuals who are in Vietnam.

We're going to turn the floor over to you. We know you have an arrangement, which you've sent to us. We'll rely upon you to guide us through that process.

May I ask you then to please begin your testimony.

[Translation]

Dr. Can Le (Commissioner for External Affairs, Vietnamese Canadian Federation): Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, good afternoon.

I want to thank all the members of the subcommittee for giving us this long-awaited opportunity to share our views on human rights violations in Vietnam.

[English]

We are very pleased to be able to assemble a group of young and relatively young witnesses who are all democracy and human rights activists with a wide range of backgrounds.

First, we have Dr. Nguyen Thang, president and CEO of Boat People SOS in the United States. He is well known in the overseas Vietnamese community and also in Vietnam for his tireless activities in helping Vietnamese refugees and victims of human trafficking and for his numerous initiatives in community development in the U.S.

We have Nguyen Khue-Tu, the commissioner for human rights for the Vietnamese Canadian Federation, who was born and raised in Canada, and who has a special interest in promoting respect for human rights in Vietnam. Over the last three years he has worked tirelessly to prepare the annual report on violations of human rights in Vietnam for the federation.

We also have three special witnesses from Vietnam—writer Pham Thanh Nghien, lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, and economist and writer Pham Chi Dung—all of whom were born and raised entirely under the communist regime. Once they realized the brutality and shortcomings of the regime, they started to raise questions about it and tried to reform it from within.

All of these witnesses are willing to testify to the subcommittee today. Being seasoned political activists, they are all aware of the risks involved in discussing political issues, but they're willing to accept them for the sake of promoting democracy and human rights in Vietnam.

To start our testimony, Khue-Tu will give an overview of the findings of her 2013 annual report on the violation of human rights in Vietnam.

Next, we'll hear from the three witnesses in Vietnam. After that, Dr. Nguyen Thang will talk about human rights, the Trans-Pacific Partnership initiative, and the human rights aspects of human trafficking. Finally, Khue-Tu will come back with some recommendations for concrete action. Following that, the floor will be open for discussion.

[*Translation*]

Since the biographical notes of the witnesses are available, in order to have as much time as possible for the presentations, I suggest that we begin right away with the testimony of Khue-Tu, if that is agreeable.

[*English*]

Ms. Khue-Tu Nguyen (Commissioner for Human Rights, Vietnamese Canadian Federation): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and ladies and gentlemen.

If I may, please, I'll start with some figures and numbers. In 2013, so in just 12 months, the Government of Vietnam sentenced more than 63 dissidents to sentences totalling more than 425 years in prison, which doesn't include lifetime sentences, and also sentenced dissidents to more than 57 years of house arrest. In addition, the Vietnamese authorities also detained, harassed, beat, kidnapped, and tortured a number of people, a number that is really too colossal to track.

The Communist Party's methods for suppressing dissent are, I might say, extremely, extremely sophisticated. Without a watchful eye, the Communist Party can easily hoodwink the international community and their own people and thus give this false facade of a

government that is trying to improve its human rights record due to international pressure, but of course that's not true.

For example, they release one activist to appease the international community, but then they arrest 10 others. They boast that they granted amnesty to thousands of prisoners, but in fact, not one of those prisoners was a prisoner of conscience. They not only admit to hiring 1,000 online public opinion shapers to indoctrinate their people and bash human rights activists, but they also physically bash them by hiring criminals to beat the activists or to cause "traffic accidents" in order to kill people so that the government is not tied to these acts of violence.

Their joining the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2013 is just a ploy to tell their people that the world regards them as a nation that respects human rights, but of course they've never listened to any one of their international obligations or human rights standards, and I think that their being on the Human Rights Council is a great opportunity for Canada to voice its concerns and to hold Vietnam to their international obligations.

In summary, they have many tools to dupe both their people and the world and create a very, very repressive society.

Our four witnesses today—three in Vietnam via video and one from the United States, Dr. Nguyen—are more than qualified to unmask the Government of Vietnam. They are witnesses and experts. If I may, please, I'll play the DVD.

Thank you very much.

[*Video Presentation*]

● (1310)

● (1315)

● (1320)

● (1325)

Thank you.

We now have our very last witness, Dr. Nguyen, who is from Virginia, in the United States. He's an expert in this matter. He is the president and CEO of Boat People SOS.

Dr. Thang Nguyen (President and Chief Executive Officer, Boat People SOS): Thank you.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, I have been monitoring the conditions in Vietnam for at least 20 years now. I have to say that we are in the midst of the worst political crackdown for the past 30 years in Vietnam, but today I will focus on labour rights and labour trafficking issues.

I would like to emphasize that there are no independent labour unions in Vietnam and that the Vietnamese government is squarely behind labour trafficking. That could be a surprise to many of you, but from our work on saving and rescuing tens of thousands of victims over the past 10 years, we have evidence of that.

Vietnam is a one-party totalitarian state. The Vietnamese Communist Party, or VCP, controls all aspects of society, including the economy, faith and religion, the media, charity work, education, labour organizing and labour export, among others.

There are no Vietnamese organizations in the true sense of NGOs, non-governmental organizations, as we know them in Canada or in the free world, that operate in Vietnam today. Those operations are actually government-organized NGOs, also known as GONGOS. They serve the dual purpose of deceiving the international community and also of squeezing out the genuine NGOs that are not approved by the government to operate.

This is also true for labour unions. Vietnamese law requires that all unions in the country be affiliated with the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour, or VGCL, which describes itself as a member of a political system under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. As such, VGCL's primary purpose is to prevent strikes so as to protect the business interests of state-owned enterprises, and of foreign companies that do business with those state-owned enterprises, and not the interests of the workers.

Indeed, in 2010, three young labour activists, Do Thi Minh Hanh, Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung, and Doan Huy Chuong, who were mentioned in some of the testimony, helped 10,000 workers at a shoe factory in Tra Vinh province to organize a strike just to demand fair wages and better working conditions. They were arrested and sentenced to seven to nine years of imprisonment for disrupting national security.

The Government of Vietnam makes a huge profit out of forced labour, some \$2 billion U.S. a year. A Human Rights Watch report that was recently released, entitled "The Rehab Archipelago", points out that hundreds of thousands of inmates in drug rehab centres across Vietnam are subjected to various forms of forced labour, including producing cashews, sewing garments, packaging seafood products, and making handicraft items for export. For instance, Canada and the U.S. are known to be major importers of cashews from Vietnam. Many political prisoners who we have interviewed for our report on torture have been subjected to forced labour. Those failing to meet the quota imposed by the jailers were beaten or sent to solitary confinement. The Vietnamese government also makes huge profits out of labour exports, some \$100 million to \$300 million U.S. a year in service fees that these migrant workers have to pay to the labour export companies, and about \$2 billion U.S. in terms of remittances sent home.

Each year Vietnam exports about 80,000 to 100,000 workers to 40 countries across the globe. A large proportion of them have ended up in modern-day slavery conditions. Since 2008, we have directly rescued over 4,000 Vietnamese victims of labour trafficking and sex trafficking and about 6,000 through advocacy. Consistently, the Vietnamese government sends delegations, high-level delegations from Hanoi, to different countries to put down the strikes held by

Vietnamese workers in other countries and threaten the strike leaders.

● (1330)

Actually, a number of strike leaders had to seek refugee protection in other countries. Dr. Can Le and I have met a number of them in Malaysia and Thailand, for instance.

I'll start with working to rescue victims of trafficking. When they returned to Vietnam, many of them were harassed, detained, or evicted from Vietnam. The Government of Vietnam has not recognized a single case of labour trafficking victims under its labour export program—nil, zero—including thousands who have been recognized by destination countries as victims of labour trafficking. No real NGO may serve those victims. As a matter of fact, a few years back, the Redemptorist order, which is a Catholic order based in Thai Ha, Hanoi, secretly set up a shelter for victims of domestic violence and victims of human trafficking. They operated secretly for a few years, until the government found out. The police came in, ransacked and closed down the shelter, evicted all the victims, and also harassed the staff and volunteers working with the project. The Catholic order has had to suspend its anti-trafficking project.

In summary, without independent labour unions and genuine anti-human trafficking NGOs working in a true civil society, workers will continue to be denied their rights in Vietnam and modern-day slavery, be it domestic or transnational, will remain widespread in Vietnam.

The GONGOS, again, serve as instruments to suppress the real civil society and also to deceive international public opinion. Therefore, I'd like to make the following recommendations to the Canadian government.

First, we have a good opportunity right now through the negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, to demand that the Vietnamese government fully respect the right of workers to form or join a free and independent labour union and to unconditionally release all imprisoned labour organizers as a pre-condition for Vietnam's membership or participation in the TPP negotiations. Vietnam needs the TPP right now, so this is the right moment for us to make the demands as pre-conditions.

Second, ask the Canadian embassy in Hanoi to engage real NGOs, even though they're not officially approved to operate, to give input to evaluate projects funded by the Canadian government, especially those that involve human trafficking and protection of labour rights.

Third, urge the Canadian embassy in Hanoi to host forums on labour rights and human trafficking and at the same time invite real NGOs to be at the table for discussion and meeting with the GONGOS from the government to at least exchange ideas and explore possibilities for collaboration in the future.

These recommendations are simple and straightforward, but they aim to expand the space for civil society to develop in Vietnam.

Thank you.

● (1335)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You promised to come back to us and deal with things in a timely fashion. You kept exactly within your time limits and I appreciate that.

The trouble we have, colleagues, is that we now have, according to my watch, nine minutes and thirteen seconds until our vote.

Mr. Marston, go ahead please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Chair, just on one point, obviously, this particular issue needs more time. That's evident to me. Also, there were a couple of frustrations and I couldn't read the screens; they were too far away. I have eye problems.

There are a number of things. The next time we're under our own business, I'd like to see the committee give consideration to inviting the two guests from Canada back, so we can have a fulsome discussion and ask questions, because we're not going to be able to do that due to the pressures of the vote we have to go to.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Let's take that as a notice of motion. It will be legal to discuss it, under our rules, the next time we meet.

Does anybody else have anything to say here?

In that case, I have to apologize. As I mentioned, there is a vote. We've been keeping track; we all have to leave now and go to the House of Commons. We'll deal with inviting you back.

I want you to understand it's really important that this is not an indication of how seriously we take the issue. We understand that, number one, Vietnam is an important country with a substantial population; number two, that you have genuine human rights concerns; number three, that the people who testified from Vietnam did so at personal risk and showed great courage; number four, that Canada, because of our strong relations, both with our Vietnamese immigrant population and our trade links with your country, has the potential to have a meaningful influence here.

On that basis, as Mr. Marston said, we'll be considering the possibility of inviting you back to deal with the questions we would have posed at this time, had we not run into this procedural problem.

With all those things being said, I want to thank you all for the trouble you've taken to make your presentations and draw these issues to our attention.

Dr. Can Le: Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the Vietnamese Canadian Federation, I'd like to thank you all for giving us the opportunity to discuss the evaluation of human rights in Vietnam. We hope that this is only the start of the dialogue, and that we'll have more opportunities to come back to talk about this issue.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, and again, my apologies on behalf of all of us.

Colleagues, with that, we are adjourned.

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