

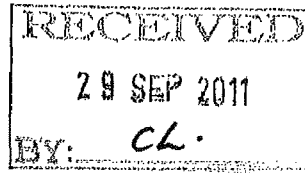


THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP

262-852.

MINISTER FOR TRADE

The Hon John Murphy MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



20 SEP 2011

Dear ~~Mr~~ Murphy

Thank you for your letter of 25 August 2011 to Mr Kevin Rudd MP, on behalf of the Standing Committee on Petitions, regarding Buddhist Monastics in Bat Nha, Vietnam. I am replying in my capacity as Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The Australian Government strongly supports the right to freedom of religion or belief, as enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Australia works multilaterally, regionally and bilaterally to promote this right. Australia co-sponsors the United Nations General Assembly's resolution on the 'Elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief'.

The Government makes regular human rights representations to countries that place restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief or impose sanctions on the exercise of this right.

In Vietnam, the Australian Government regularly raises human rights concerns, including freedom of religion. Mr Rudd personally discussed these concerns with Vietnam's leadership during his visit to Vietnam in April 2011.

Australia has a bilateral Human Rights Dialogue with Vietnam in which we continue to raise human rights issues, including cases where individuals and groups have been arrested and/or imprisoned for the peaceful expression of their political or religious beliefs. The eighth round of the Dialogue was held in Canberra in February 2011.

In September 2009, the Australian Embassy in Hanoi closely monitored the situation of the monks and nuns expelled from the Bat Nha Monastery. The Embassy was in contact with senior representatives of the followers of the Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam. Embassy officials raised concerns with the Government of Vietnam and sought further information from relevant ministries. In our discussions with the Government of Vietnam the Embassy emphasised consistently the importance of peaceful resolution of religious disputes.

Vietnam is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which includes key human rights guarantees in respect of freedom of religion. Australia regularly urges Vietnam to uphold the ICCPR's provisions, including through the Human Rights Dialogue.

Australia also plays a constructive role at the Human Rights Council, including through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. The UPR provides a forum for constructive discussion of human rights situations in all UN member states, including Vietnam, and it identifies practical steps to be taken to address specific human rights concerns. Australia was an active participant in Vietnam's UPR review in 2009.

I can assure you that the Australian Government will continue to take appropriate opportunities to raise the issue of religious freedom with the Government of Vietnam.

Yours sincerely

Craig Emerson