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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

SPEECH

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Mr SIMPKINS

Source House
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Responder
Question No.

(Cowan) (NaN.NaN pm)

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (18:40): I take this opportunity to protest the abuse by the government of Vietnam of human rights and the outrageous treatment of human rights activists, dissidents and supporters of a democratic Vietnam. It was certainly the case that when the detail of this motion was distributed I immediately sought the opportunity to speak. I believe that I am on the record in this place as being very strongly on the side of a free and democratic Vietnam. I thank my friends from the WA Vietnamese community: Peter Le, the president; Dai Nguyen, the vice-president; the committee, as well as my friends in Viet Tan, the Vietnam Reform Party; and the master of the Vietnamese temple, the venerable Thich Phuoc Nhon.

I am particularly keen to participate because of my personal link in this matter. I say that because I worshipped with the members of the Cow Shed congregation of the Mennonite Church on Sunday, 9 January this year, and met with the friends and family of the seven people named in this motion. I sang with the members of the church and I prayed with them on that day. In speaking with the members of the church, we spoke of five of those mentioned in the motion: Pastor Khai; Evangelist Nguyen Chi Thanh; and followers Pham Van Thong, Nguyen Thanh Tam and Pham Ngoc Hoa. All were in jail at the time of my visit to the flooded Chuong Bo Church in Saigon.

It is tragic that there were arrests and now sentencing, on 30 May 2011, of the seven activists. It is in fact an indictment of the Vietnamese system of government and justice system that they should be able to be convicted of a charge of attempting to overthrow the people's administration when what they did was to support open and accountable government, support human rights and act as patriots of a free and independent Vietnam. That is what they did when they chose to advocate for democratic reform; engage in non-violent protests to prepare and distribute materials affirming Vietnamese sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands; petition the state for redress on behalf of local landowners; and engage in peaceful advocacy for social justice.

When I think of how these courageous people suffer for an excellent cause, I think back to that morning I

spent with their family and friends. I will not name who was there in the church on that day, because I know that what I have said in the past here is read by the Vietnamese Ministry for Foreign Affairs and I do not want to put them at any more risk than they have already endured. However, there is not a day that goes by when I do not think of the Cow Shed Church and its members. I think of their fearlessness, their courage and their determination in the face of a government determined to maintain power, using security forces that amount to one officer for every 10 families in Vietnam. There is little doubt that those who choose to resist risk a great deal for their cause and their faith. Pastor Duong Kim Khai was evicted from his home where the congregation had met and had to move to the cow shed. So when I think of the wooden framed shed, with the palm tree frond roof and the flaps of silver insulation on the side and of the wooden plank that his wife has to sleep on it reminds me that there are big problems in Vietnam. It reminds me that the country is not democratic and that many people are oppressed by this regime.

I recall how I got to the church that day after changing transport on many occasions just to avoid being followed. Yet for me that was just one morning, whereas for those who are still there it is their life and that breaks my heart. I therefore fully support the view expressed in this motion that the authorities of Vietnam use legal processes to rationalise human rights abuse and to silence peaceful opposition. We call on the federal government to use the full weight of their diplomatic relations with Vietnam to lobby for substantial reform in human rights and basic freedoms in accordance with the provisions of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, to which both Australia and Vietnam are parties. It is, however, right that I take this opportunity to speak more widely of religious freedom in Vietnam. From my two visits to Vietnam I am committed to the view that there is no religious freedom in Vietnam. If you want to worship you can do so, but you must provide the list of your congregation members to the authorities. You must also provide the names of anyone who visits your church or temple. Your minister must also be registered. So if you do all that, along with ensuring that any sermons are not critical of the government and that you fly the flag of the state in front of your church, then you can carry on. But I do not call that freedom of

religion; that is just state controlled religion, and it is not what we would accept here in Australia.

On the matter of religious freedom in Vietnam, as part of my visit to Vietnam in January this year I had two meetings that I specifically wanted to achieve. I wanted to visit the Roman Catholic priest in Hue, Father Ly, and I wanted to visit the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do in Saigon, both of whom I have previously spoken about in the parliament, as has the member for Fowler. Father Ly, who was born in 1947, has spent more than 15 years in jail for his belief in freedom of speech and freedom of religion. He is a man committed to peaceful and non-violent protest. Father Ly has been speaking about and taking action for democracy and religious freedom for many years. Since 1977 he has been harassed, arrested, brutalised and jailed for his activities.

On 8 April 2006, a group of dissidents signed the Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam. The manifesto calls for a multiparty state in Vietnam and that group became known as Bloc 8406, named for the date they signed the manifesto. It calls for democracy, and Father Ly was a founding member for Bloc 8406. In September of that year, Father Ly was also involved in the establishment of the Vietnam Progression Party. For his courage and commitment to democracy and for his support of Bloc 8406, Father Ly was jailed for eight years on 30 March 2007. He had been arrested on 19 February after a raid by security police in the Catholic Archdiocese of Hue. Father Ly is a courageous and honourable man who has made great sacrifices for his beliefs. He has spent many years in jail. He has spent many years being harassed and brutalised by an oppressive regime. After suffering a stroke, he was released from jail and remains under house arrest in Hue.

My meeting with Father Ly was scheduled for 7 January 2011. On 6 January, in Hanoi, I met the Deputy Director-General of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr Hoang Chi Trung said that if I attempted to visit Father Ly in Hue they could not guarantee my safety, which I took to mean I would be arrested and probably deported. Mr Trung also made reference to my support of what he called a 'terrorist organisation', the Viet Tan. In speaking of Father Ly, it was clear that the view of the deputy director-general was that any suggestion by Father Ly or others of establishing opposition parties or opposition bodies outside of state affiliation or agencies constituted a direct threat to national security. In this case, rather than risk deportation, I decided to go to Saigon and attempt to meet with the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do on 8 January.

After being picked up in a taxi by two of the Most Venerable's followers, we drove into the suburbs of Saigon followed by security force officers. Despite being followed, we arrived at the Thanh Minh temple and were not stopped by the plain clothes security officers across the road. So in that regard I am grateful to the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for allowing that meeting to take place. In that meeting, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do stated that nothing had changed in the last 30 years. He said that in Vietnam you must bow down to the communists and follow their orders. He said that in Vietnam, there is one police officer or security person for every 10 families and that while it was bad in Saigon, with security police ruling each district, it was worse in the country, where the security forces could oppress the local people extremely and easily, monitoring or stopping meetings taking place. Life in the country was already bad because people did not have enough food to eat.

Thich Quang Do also said to me that he and his supporters were always followed wherever they went and therefore he rarely went out other than for medical reasons, normally. It was clear on my arrival that plain clothes security personnel were across the laneway from the temple. He also said that he had never been charged, tried or convicted of any crime but he has been verbally told that he is under house arrest. But they are careful to ensure that there is no hard evidence of this abuse of his human rights.

In speaking about the situation in Vietnam, he said that the communists rule for themselves and they will never give up or share the power in Vietnam. He said they sell the country to China and reap the profits themselves as a small ruling elite. He said that many had died at the hands of the communists but another very important problem is the bribes and corruption. Corruption takes place from the local offices all the way up to the top officials.

It is certainly the case that when you look at what takes place in Vietnam, despite the assertions made by the ruling party in the country, there is a long way to go before there will be religious freedom. There is oppression that takes place across the whole spectrum, in religion as well as democracy—the oppression of the Montagnards, the Mennonite followers, the dissident Catholics, the dissident Buddhists. There is oppression everywhere and there is very little reform. So it is right that we talk about it in this place. We hope that the government will take it forward and continue to apply pressure, and apply more pressure, on the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to pursue dramatic reforms of human rights and freedoms via our diplomatic relations with that country.