



Amnesty International

Group 524

March 2018



Next Meeting: Tuesday, March 20 – 7:00 p.m. – Providence Heights

Burma (Myanmar): Senate Committee Approves Expanded Authority for Sanctions

Since last fall, human rights advocates have been lobbying Congress to pass legislation that would authorize targeted sanctions aimed at the perpetrators of human rights abuses in Burma. This month, the Senate version of that bill received unanimous approval in the Foreign Relations Committee. See Page 3 for details.

Vietnam: Model Letter to Congressman Alan Lowenthal

Concerning Vietnam, we are contacting a member of Congress who has been active in calling for freedom for **Thich Quang Do**. See Page 2 for a model letter to Congressman Alan Lowenthal, urging the “adoption” of Thich Quang Do into the Defending Freedoms Project.

We don’t have anything new on the notorious Formosa Steel plant, but on March 1st two other polluting steel plants were shut down – at least temporarily – by citizen protests.

Last month’s newsletter included three pages of photos and text from a long press release issued on January 29th by the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights. They showed Thich Quang Do reading cards from a packet of greetings sent to him by our Amnesty colleagues of Group 56 (Lexington, MA). See Pages 4 – 6 for the remaining pictures from that press release.

March 20th at Providence Heights

This week Donald Trump nominated a torture advocate (Michael Pompeo) to be Secretary of State, and a torturer (Gina Haspel) to succeed him as head of the CIA. That’s a topic for next week’s meeting, along with our usual petitions to sign, and greetings to send to prisoners of conscience. We hope you can join us. There’s plenty of room around that big table!

Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.

Meeting Location: Providence Heights

9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Warren (jf.warren@verizon.net or 412-766-2506) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA website (www.amnestyusa.org) or the website of Amnesty International Group 39 (amnestypgh.org).



Vietnam: Model Letter in Behalf of Thich Quang Do

In December 2012, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, in conjunction with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Amnesty International USA, launched the Defending Freedoms Project (DFP) to support prisoners of conscience around the world.

Under this program, a member of Congress “adopts” a prisoner of conscience and advocates for that person’s release. Click this link to learn more about the DFP:

<https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/defending-freedom-project>

With this model letter, we are joining with our colleagues in Group 56 (Lexington, MA) in contacting Rep. Alan Lowenthal and urging the “adoption” of Thich Quang Do into DFP. Mr. Lowenthal, who represents a district near Los Angeles, has already shown interest in this case, presenting testimony at a hearing this year and also visiting Thich Quang Do back in 2015.

Representative Alan Lowenthal
125 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Lowenthal:

I am writing you to urge the “adoption” of Thich Quang Do as part of the Defending Prisoners of Conscience program. Knowing your history of concern for this prisoner of conscience and your recent testimony before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I feel sure that you are aware of his lifelong efforts to protect human rights.

During the more than three decades that Thich Quang Do has been imprisoned, exiled, detained indefinitely, and held under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Monastery near Saigon, he has never wavered from his path of non-violent resistance.

In his words and his actions, Thich Quang Do exemplifies what this program represents:
“For I believe that nonviolence and compassion will overcome hatred and repression, and I will pursue this path, whatever the consequences.”

For the last five years our local Amnesty International group in the Pittsburgh area has worked for the release of Thich Quang Do. While it has been frustrating and sometimes disheartening work, we continue because we believe in what Thich Quang Do represents and the message he is delivering for human rights worldwide. Please do whatever you can to make his release possible through the Defending Freedoms Project.

Thank you for your consideration.



Washington: Human Rights Groups Push for Sanctions on Burma

This February 8th report from Human Rights Watch describes the efforts by HRW, AIUSA, and other human rights groups to gain passage of legislation that would expand authority to impose sanctions against Burma (Myanmar) for its widespread human rights abuses, particularly against the country's Rohingya Muslim population. The article focuses on the Senate bill (S. 2060, co-sponsored by Senator Robert Casey). There is a corresponding bill in the House (HR 4223). On February 26th, during an AIUSA lobbying action, our colleague Eve Wider met with Representative Mike Doyle of Pittsburgh, and he expressed support for the bill.

US Senate Committee Takes Aim at Burma for Atrocities Against Rohingya

In a unanimous vote on February 7th, Republicans and Democrats in a key US Senate committee joined to support important new legislation to address the appalling deterioration in Burma's human rights record over the past year, in particular rampant abuses against the Rohingya Muslim population. The vote demonstrated a broad bipartisan consensus that a shift is needed in US policy toward Burma. On that day, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee considered the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act (S. 2060) and passed it out of the committee with no objections. It will now need a full vote on the Senate floor. A similar bill (HR 4223) has been introduced in the House of Representatives.

Passage of the legislation would demonstrate broad-based US concern for the situation since late August 2017, when the Burmese military began a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing in western Burma's Rakhine State, committing widespread killings, rapes, arbitrary arrests, and mass arson in hundreds of predominantly Rohingya villages. More than 700,000 Rohingya were forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh, while many others remain displaced within Burma.

The Senate bill will enhance the US government's authority to impose narrowly tailored sanctions and travel restrictions on military and other security personnel implicated in the abuses, including commanders who exercised command and control over the military operation. An amendment to the bill, introduced by Senator Edward Markey, cites Human Rights Watch research on widespread gang rapes and other sexual and gender-based violence and calls on the government to sanction implicated commanders.

Human Rights Watch found that the recent atrocities against the Rohingya amounted to crimes against humanity, as were attacks on the population in 2012. For decades, successive Burmese governments have discriminated against the Rohingya, who were effectively denied citizenship. Severe restrictions were placed on their freedom of movement, access to basic health care, and education and employment opportunities. Meanwhile, Burma's nascent democratic transition shows signs of weakening. The military has blocked efforts to end its constitutionally protected role in the government, and it is still committing serious abuses during operations in other ethnic minority areas, blocking access to humanitarian agencies, and causing mass displacement.

Thus far, Burma's leadership, particularly its military commanders, have been able to ignore diplomatic pressure to reverse their abusive policies. It is now clear that their behavior won't change until the costs of inaction grow too high for them to bear. This bill can help to impose those higher costs.

Vietnam: Press Release from Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

As explained on Page 1, the first portion of the January 29th press release appeared in our February newsletter. This section contains the remaining photographs and text.

If you would like to view the full press release online, here is the link:

<http://queme.org/en/massachusetts-high-school-students-speak-thich-quang-do/?v=7516fd43adaa>

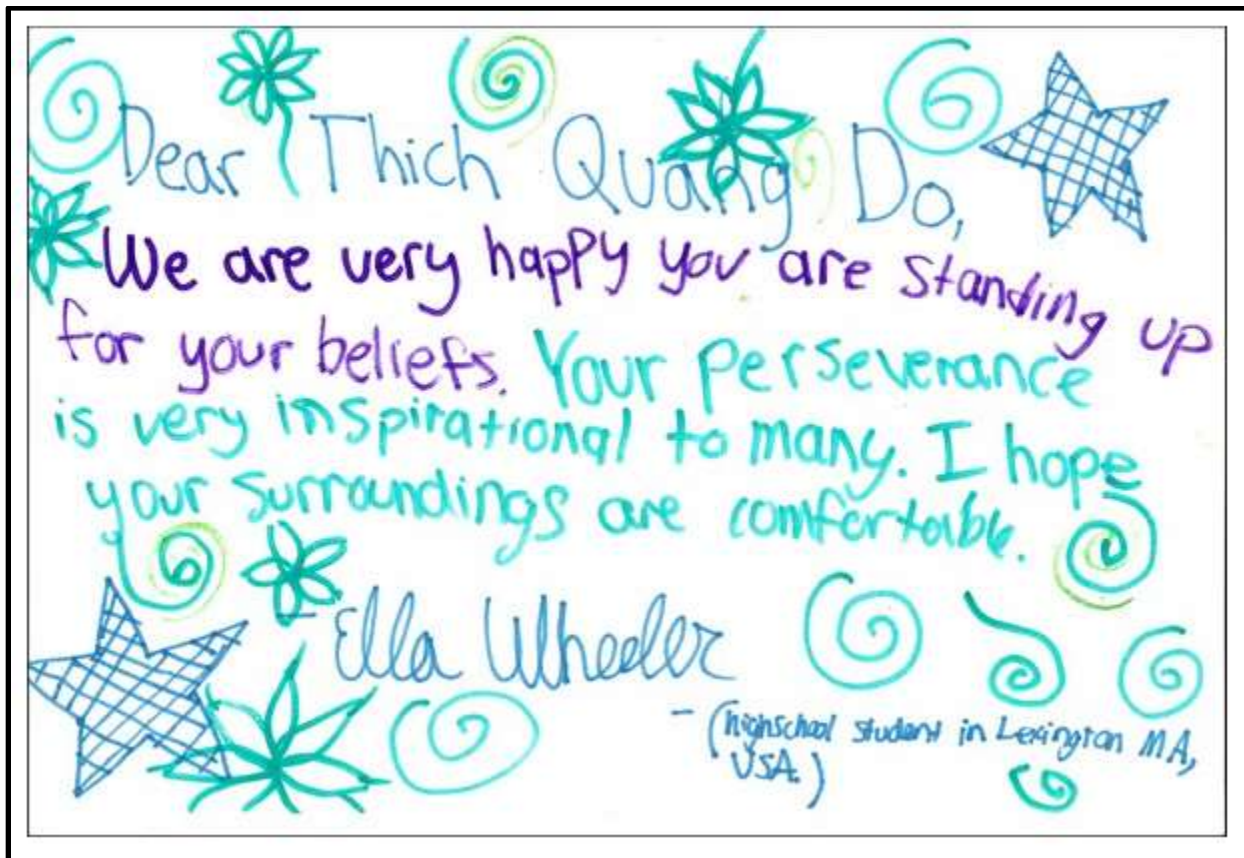


Vietnam: Press Release from Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (continued)

Ella Wheeler: *“Dear Thich Quang Do, we are very happy you are standing up for your beliefs. Your perseverance is very inspirational to many. I hope your surroundings are comfortable.”*

Jordan O’Hare Gibson: *I hope this note finds you in good health. In today’s world it is good to hear about people like you who refuse to give in to tyranny and unjust government officials. I hope you continue the fight for justice.”*

Chelsea, Liz, Leo, Oliver and many others sent messages, drawings and cards, as well as members of Amnesty International’s Group 56 in Lexington, including Alvin Jacobson, Edwin G. Cranston (Professor of Japanese literature at Harvard University), Bill Harris, Terry Kay Rockefeller (Documentary film producer), etc. Alvin Jacobson, who launched the initiative, said he had sent many letters to Thích Quảng Độ since his group adopted the UBCV leader as a prisoner of conscience in 2002, but very few ever reached him.



Vietnam: Press Release from Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (continued)

Unlike the other cards, which were created by high school students, this card was illustrated by the two young grandsons of our friend and colleague, Al Jacobson!

