

Veteran For Peace Chapter #160 (Hoa Binh Chapter, Vietnam)

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Each year the U.S. Department of State, as mandated by Congress, publishes reports which summarize human rights practices of virtually every country in the world. Many countries, including Vietnam, respond with specific counter-arguments to some of these U.S. allegations and often provide their own assessments of their government's human rights record. A few nations, notably the People's Republic of China, conduct their own critical assessments of U.S. human rights practices and publish reports which usually allege serious human rights violations by the U.S. itself.

As members of Veterans For Peace Chapter 160, based in Vietnam, we view these human rights reports and responses from various nations as useful, even though they sometimes annoy governments which are criticized.

Even if the reports are incomplete or not totally accurate, they draw attention to the *fundamental truth* that protecting human rights for all people of the world is a challenge that requires honesty, objectivity, unity across state borders and untiring commitment of decent people everywhere.

The U.S. State Department's assessment of Vietnam's human rights record includes some factual information which might be useful if considered carefully by Vietnamese authorities. Officials in Vietnam should be encouraged to support basic rights of their citizens, who often are trying to help their government by pointing out areas of weakness, or areas where the letter and the spirit of the law are not being followed. That is the right and duty of every citizen – in Vietnam and in the U.S. The State Department report highlights some of the areas where Vietnam can do better, and that can be useful.

At the same time, the U.S. State Department report appears to demand of Vietnam a higher standard than is now practiced in the U.S. For example, political prisoners are hunted and captured around the world by U.S. government agents. Some of them are brought to Guantanamo prison as permanent detainees. These unnamed persons have not been charged with a crime, and many have not had a legal hearing.

Additionally, nowhere in the U.S. human rights report is there mention of one of the last century's major human rights violations perpetrated against Vietnam: the legacy of tons of unexploded ordnance dropped on Vietnam by the U.S., which have killed or maimed more than 100,000 people since the war ended, and the millions of gallons of Agent Orange which poisoned the countryside and generations of innocent children and adults.

Human Rights must be unabridged, anywhere and everywhere. The definitions of what constitutes "human rights" should not be selective or arbitrary.

Vietnam's own report on its human rights record, which summarizes many commendable initiatives and policies over the years, shows that Vietnam has been at the forefront of many worthy initiatives which have vastly improved the lives, and the freedoms and rights, of the people of Vietnam. Those achievements also are to be lauded.

The diplomatic critiques which continue year after year – under the guise of “human rights reports” – do shine light on some truths that are unavoidable. They cast useful doubts on practices which governments simply cannot defend, honestly and truthfully.

No nation is blameless.

CHUCK SEARCY

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