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Attack on a Diplomat Shows Vietnam's Contempt for Human Rights

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Cho Lon, Vietnam: While the world's attention is riveted on the Middle East, democracy continues to struggle to take root in other regions.

Only last summer, Vietnam and the United States celebrated the 15th anniversary of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations. The resumption of ties has proved profitable for Vietnam: The United States is its largest foreign investor, the countries have more than \$15 billion in annual bilateral trade, and 13,000 Vietnamese nationals are attending college in America.

Despite these developments, a U.S. official in Vietnam was manhandled by a crowd last month while police stood by. Christian Marchant, a political officer attached to the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi, was roughed up when he attempted to visit a dissident Roman Catholic priest.

The meeting between Marchant and Nguyen Van Ly had been arranged in advance. Ly told Radio Free Asia that police prevented Marchant from entering his house and pushed him to the ground when he tried to pass them.

Some witnesses said a car door was slammed on Marchant's leg before he was taken away by police. A State Department spokesman said that day that Marchant's injury was not serious but that he was limping after the incident.

The U.S. ambassador in Hanoi, Michael Michalak, called the incident "a flagrant violation of international law." A spokesman for Vietnam's Foreign Ministry has said an investigation is being conducted - but warned that foreign diplomats should observe the laws of their host country.

Perhaps it is Vietnam, though, that needs to familiarize itself with international law. The Vienna Convention in particular makes clear that it is the responsibility of host countries to prevent assaults on foreign diplomats.

Factors contributing to Vietnam's behavior predate the signing of a bilateral trade agreement, Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization or even the resumption of diplomatic relations with Washington. At each juncture, Vietnam has promised to respect human rights and comply with international law. Each time, however, Vietnam has learned that it can reap all the benefits without honoring any of its promises.

Two days before the January incident, the hometown paper of Marchant's parents published a profile noting that he was to share the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Award in February. The article cited a State Department news release calling Marchant "a persuasive advocate for Vietnam's beleaguered dissident community, tirelessly serving as a conduit for imprisoned dissidents, their families, and the outside world."

In the profile, Marchant speaks about his attempts to find common ground with the Vietnamese. But he made clear that the United States could not be silent about abuses. In the past year, he told the paper, 25 Vietnamese have been jailed for criticizing their government.

"The big difference between the two countries," he said, "is that if people in a position of authority in the United States abuse an individual, they go to jail."

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has warned Hanoi that while the United States would like to deepen bilateral relations, including trade, Vietnam's human rights record remains a stumbling block. These sorts of statements make officials unpopular with Communist authorities. But the people of Vietnam are grateful to have friends who speak out.

I met Marchant in 2009, when we discussed at length the worsening of human rights violations in Vietnam and what the United States might do. He struck me as an active, dedicated diplomat with a soft voice, a humble heart and a friendly bearing. As a Vietnamese, I am ashamed at what this man has had to endure for doing his job.

A larger question is why 15 years of closer relations have apparently not made an impression on Vietnam's Communist leaders. Their approach is clear: Take American trade and investment, but keep democracy and human rights at bay.

I wonder how the American people will respond to one of their diplomats being roughed up with the apparent approval of Vietnamese authorities. I hope Americans see this for what it is. Why should anyone expect a government that doesn't respect its citizens to respect foreigners? Other governments are watching, wondering how America will respond to this insult.

As for the communists here, the truth is that Hanoi needs Washington much more than Washington needs Hanoi. Vietnam's leaders may live to regret allowing an American official to be treated so badly. But today Vietnam looks out at a re-militarized China and an ongoing dispute in the South China Sea, not to mention domestic woes that include a sluggish economy and an outdated education system.

And if Washington is looking to Vietnam for a long-term partner for peace and regional stability, America would do well to recognize publicly that only a Vietnam that is free and democratic can provide one.

The writer is a physician and head of the Non-Violent Movement for Human Rights in Vietnam. He has been imprisoned three times, for a total of 20 years, for expressing his democratic beliefs.