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**REVIEW & OUTLOOK****Vietnam's American Prisoners**

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Vietnam has been working hard to improve its relationship with the U.S. Yet just eight months ago, Hanoi undermined that effort by imprisoning a human-rights activist with ties to the U.S. Now it is repeating the same mistake.

On Nov. 17, Communist authorities in Ho Chi Minh City broke up a small, peaceful meeting of democracy activists held in a private home. Among those arrested were Nguyen Quoc Quan and Leon Truong, both American citizens. Mr. Nguyen was born in Vietnam but fled to the U.S. in 1981, where he started a family, earned a doctorate and built a career in IT in Sacramento, California. Mr. Truong, also born in Vietnam, emigrated in 1979 and settled in Honolulu, Hawaii, becoming a citizen in 1985.

At the time of their arrest, Messrs. Nguyen and Truong allegedly were preparing to distribute pamphlets on nonviolent resistance. An official newspaper in Hanoi said they were found with 7,000 leaflets along with envelopes and postage. They had also brought into the country a new Vietnamese translation of "From Dictatorship to Democracy," a nonviolence handbook published by the U.S.-based nonprofit, nongovernmental Albert Einstein Institution. Also arrested at the house were a French citizen, a Thai man and several local Vietnamese activists.

Hanoi's continuing persecution of human-rights advocates of all kinds is bad enough. But the jailing of two Americans is made worse by the fact that it's part of a pattern. In August 2006, Hanoi arrested another U.S. citizen, Cong Thanh Do, for similar activism. He was released and deported back to the U.S. more than a month later, but only after he went on a hunger strike and Members of the U.S. Congress protested his jailing.

In March of this year, Hanoi arrested yet another activist with ties to the U.S., Le Quoc Quan. A Vietnamese citizen, he was detained just days after returning home from a congressionally sponsored fellowship at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington. He was freed in June after pressure from the U.S. government.

Hanoi may hope that such arrests will deter overseas Vietnamese from meddling in domestic politics, but if that's the case it doesn't seem to be working. According to Mai Huong Ngo, Mr. Nguyen's wife, her husband was aware of the risks but decided to go anyway. "He loves Vietnam," she told us last week, and as a naturalized citizen of a free country, "he deeply appreciates freedom." "I know for sure my husband didn't do anything wrong," she said, adding that she hopes she and her two teenage children see her husband again by Christmas.

The U.S. embassy in Hanoi has finally been granted consular access to Messrs. Nguyen and Truong, although only after a long delay. Congress is again protesting, as it has even in cases

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where the dissidents were not U.S. citizens. After the Nov. 17 arrests, Reps. Loretta Sanchez, Zoe Lofgren and Neil Abercrombie signed an open letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asking her to press Hanoi for the Americans' release. In Mr. Nguyen's case, Hanoi initially responded by pretending that it didn't know he's a U.S. citizen -- for more than a week after the arrests, state media reports described his nationality status as "unknown." At least now the authorities have dropped that pretense.

Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization and President Nguyen Minh Triet's June visit to the White House were significant steps in the process of forging better ties with the U.S. Yet with closer economic relations will come tighter political scrutiny and demands for accountability. If Hanoi wants to stay in Washington's good graces, imprisoning Americans for peaceful activism is a particularly bad way to do it.

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