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## Viet Leader: No Need to Fix Human Rights

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WASHINGTON -- Despite pressure from U.S. lawmakers and President George W. Bush, Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet said Friday that his country does not need to improve its human rights record.

"It's not a question of improving or not," Triet said in an interview with The Associated Press, hours after meeting with Bush. "Vietnam has its own legal framework, and those who violate the law will be handled."

Triet, the first president from the communist-led nation to visit the White House since the Vietnam War, acknowledged differences in the countries' positions on the matter and called for more dialogue. He said his talks with Bush were "frank and open" and that disagreement over human rights would not stop a thriving trade relationship from getting stronger.

"The Vietnamese laws could not be 100 percent the same as the United States laws, due to the different historical backgrounds and conditions," Triet said through an interpreter. "There is a different understanding on this issue."

Bush said he pressed Triet during their meeting on the importance of having a strong commitment to human rights and democracy. U.S. lawmakers, in a meeting Thursday, urged Triet to make stronger efforts to stop what they describe as widespread abuse of Vietnam's citizens.

"I explained my strong belief that societies are enriched when people are allowed to express themselves freely or worship freely," Bush said in the Oval Office after meeting with Triet.

"We want to have good relations with Vietnam," Bush said, as dozens of protesters outside the White House waved flags and carried signs critical of Vietnam's government.

Triet has tried to keep the focus on vibrant trade ties between the United States and one of Asia's fastest-growing economies. The countries began a bilateral trade agreement in 2001; trade reached nearly \$10 billion (euro7.4 billion) last year.

Triet, known as a crusader against corruption and a supporter of economic liberalization, said in the interview that his government is working hard to make Vietnam attractive to foreign investors by improving administrative procedures.

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He is leading a delegation of more than 100 Vietnamese businessmen. He signed with the United States on Thursday a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, which sometimes acts as a road map toward free trade negotiations.

During an hour-long private meeting Thursday, senior U.S. lawmakers repeatedly took Triet to task for claims by rights groups that Vietnam has ramped up repression of political activists and religious leaders.

"We've got to see a stop to this conduct if this relationship is going to improve," said Rep. Ed Royce, R-Calif.

When asked about Triet's response, Royce answered: "Evasion."

Vietnam tolerates no challenges to Communist one-party rule; it insists, however, that only lawbreakers are jailed. In recent months, Vietnam has arrested or sentenced at least eight pro-democracy activists, including a dissident Roman Catholic priest who was sentenced to eight years in prison.

[Rep. Roy Blunt](#), the No. 2 House Republican, said Triet told lawmakers that Vietnam "had lots of human rights, but the dissidents were somehow endangering the security of the country. We pressed hard for more information about exactly what that means."

Sherman Katz, a senior associate in international trade at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Vietnam has "got to be aware that part of the price of doing business with the United States, if you expect the U.S. government to help you, is to clean up some of these" human rights problems.

Hundreds of protesters, most of them critical of Triet and his government's human rights record, demonstrated Friday night at Triet's next stop, in Los Angeles. A huge number of Vietnamese resettled in California's Orange County after the war.

Most of the demonstrators along the Pacific Coast Highway near the St. Regis Resort, Monarch Beach, were of Vietnamese descent. They waved American flags and the red-striped yellow flag of the former South Vietnam.

When Triet's motorcade arrived, protesters were kept at a distance by Orange County sheriff's deputies on horseback but still found a way to express their anger.

"Nguyen Minh Triet go home!" they screamed.

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