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Vietnam, U.S. Spar on Rights Before Trade Talks

By Grant McCool
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HANOI (Reuters) - Vietnam, which hopes to be taken off a U.S. blacklist on religious rights to ease passage to the World Trade Organization, on Thursday rejected as "completely wrong" a report saying Hanoi had not done enough on freedom of faith.

A government statement contained Vietnam's repeated response that its laws guarantee religious belief, but some U.S. congressmen have linked religious and human rights to approving any trade deal with the communist-run country.

Vietnamese and U.S. trade negotiators were scheduled to meet in Washington next Monday through Thursday, the latest in a series of lengthy talks over several years.

Once a deal is made, Congress must vote on whether to give the Southeast Asian nation what is called Permanent Normal Trade Relations Status, one of the last steps needed before it can submit a final request for WTO membership.

"The implementation of these laws has met the demand for religious practices of followers as well as religious leaders and monks in Vietnam and created noticeable changes in religious life," Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Dung said in a statement.

He was responding to Wednesday's recommendation by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to keep Vietnam on Washington's list of "countries of particular concern" on religious rights.

In April, a U.S. House of Representatives resolution called on Vietnam to free 30 people it described as democracy and religious activists and linked the measure to WTO accession.

The United States is the only deal Vietnam needs to join the world's biggest trading club in 2006, having signed agreements with all of its other major trading partners.

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WTO members such as China and Saudi Arabia are also on the religion blacklist, which is reviewed once or twice a year.

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"In the past year, there has not yet been enough tangible progress on religious freedom concerns in Vietnam to warrant removal," the commission's report said.

It said despite freeing of religious leaders and re-opening of churches in the sensitive Central Highlands, "serious abuses" continued against some Buddhists and Protestant Christians.

"The recommendation is completely wrong and not reflective of the true situation," the Vietnamese spokesman said.

Vietnam is working on a timetable to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican, seat of the Roman Catholic Church.

President George W. Bush is scheduled to visit Hanoi in November when the Vietnamese capital hosts the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

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