

Middle passage

Vietnamese refugees testify to safety in America and need for Obama administration—its first international religious freedom report due this month—to stand by those who remain behind **by JAMIE DEAN** in Raleigh, N.C.

ON A SUNDAY MORNING at the First Montagnard Church of Raleigh, some 250 people from the Central Highlands of Vietnam read in unison a New Testament passage translated into Jarai, their native tongue: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”

It’s a passage that resonates with this group. Over the last 23 years, thousands of Montagnards—an ethnic minority from Vietnam’s Central Highlands—have fled their homeland, usually not knowing where they were going. Most have ended up in North Carolina with the help of refugee resettlement groups, struggling to adjust to a new way of life and worrying about those they left behind.

They’ve come here because life in the Central Highlands can be brutal, particularly for the mostly Protestant and Catholic Montagnards living under Communist rule. Adding to the severe mix: Montagnards allied with the United States and fought North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Their Christian faith and their U.S. loyalty have left Montagnards a target for oppression and persecution in a land where they were already alienated from the Vietnamese.

But the Montagnards’ plight is just one part of religious persecution unfolding in Vietnam. The Communist government oppresses other Christian groups in some parts of the country, and also targets Buddhists and other religious groups. Authorities recently shut down the famous Bat Nha Buddhist monastery in the Central Highlands, smashing windows, damaging buildings, and ordering the 379 monks to leave. Another target: activists and attorneys who speak out for greater religious freedoms and human rights in the country.

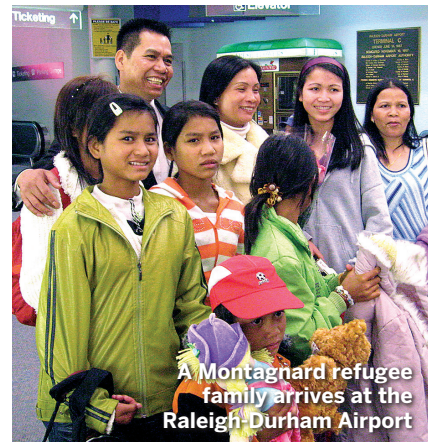
All of this leads to an important

moment for the U.S. State Department. The department’s Office of International Religious Freedom is scheduled to release its annual International Religious Freedom Report this month—the first such report from the Obama administration. Officials will reveal whether they will add or remove any nations on the department’s list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom. A growing chorus of religious freedom advocates and members of Congress say Vietnam should be on that list. But the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam doesn’t seem so sure.

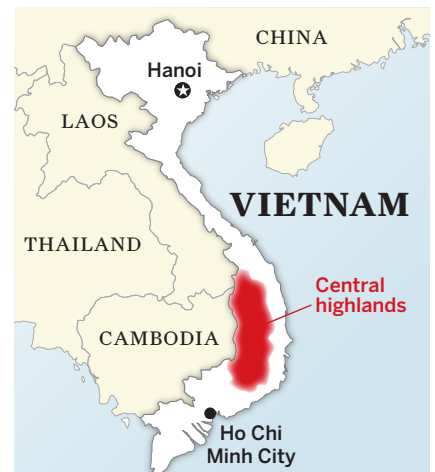
The department’s decision is weighty: Religious freedom experts say that putting Vietnam on the CPC list in the past led to small, but important improvements on the part of the Vietnamese government. Leaving them off the list, they say, could reverse improvements—or lead to worsening conditions for religious groups facing growing oppression.

The CPC designation indicates a country is guilty of particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and prods nations to make changes. Vietnam made the list in 2004 and 2005, but the Bush administration removed the nation from the CPC list in 2006, partially paving the way for Vietnam to join the World Trade Organization in 2007. Commissioners at the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) say that religious freedom conditions have deteriorated since then and that the State Department should put Vietnam back on the CPC list.

So far, the signals haven’t been favorable: U.S. ambassador to Vietnam Michael Michalak has said he doesn’t think there’s enough evidence to return Vietnam to the list. Groups like USCIRF—and some members of Congress—disagree and have documented cases of religious persecution over the last two years. But some of the



A Montagnard refugee family arrives at the Raleigh-Durham Airport



Montagnard mountain tribesmen in 1962 receiving military training

most compelling evidence comes from those who have fled.

Hri Rmah fled the Central Highlands in 2004, three years after her husband escaped the country and came to North Carolina. Rmah says local authorities constantly harassed her Montagnard family over their Christian faith,

particularly her husband: "In 2001, they took him to jail because of his religion." Life for Rmah and her four children grew even more difficult until they were finally able to leave, she says. "It was very hard because the police came to my house all the time."

Five years later, Rmah's brow furrows when she talks about home. She's just attended the church service in Raleigh, a luxury her parents in the Central Highlands don't enjoy without harassment from local authorities. Rmah's father was imprisoned for two years for his Christian practice. Prison guards forced him to carry heavy buckets of water on his head, leaving him significantly disabled. Now, they come to his home to ask about Rmah and her family. "They still monitor my parents' religion all the time," she says.

Rmah dismisses the Vietnamese government's claim that it allows freedom of religion to Montagnards: "The Communists say one thing, but they do another."

Y Phuat Enuol agrees. The 43-year-old Montagnard has been in the United States for a little over a year. Through a translator, Enuol describes the time he spent in prison for speaking out for greater religious freedoms in mass demonstrations by Protestants in 2001 and 2004. As he speaks in Jarai, he points to different parts of his body. The translator explains that Enuol is describing the beatings and torture he endured: a broken knee, two broken ribs, broken jaw, cracked chest, and needles driven into his fingers.

After authorities jailed him again in 2007, Enuol escaped to Cambodia and eventually came to the United States. Now he waits for his wife and seven children to join him, though he says Vietnamese officials are stalling the process for their paperwork to leave the country. In the meantime, he speaks with his wife only sporadically, convinced that local authorities have tapped the phones. What he does hear isn't good: Local police harass his wife and berate her during mandatory community meetings.

Enuol says that government control extends to local churches and that Vietnamese reports of religious freedom are propaganda: "The truth is, the Montagnard religion in the Central Highlands is never free."

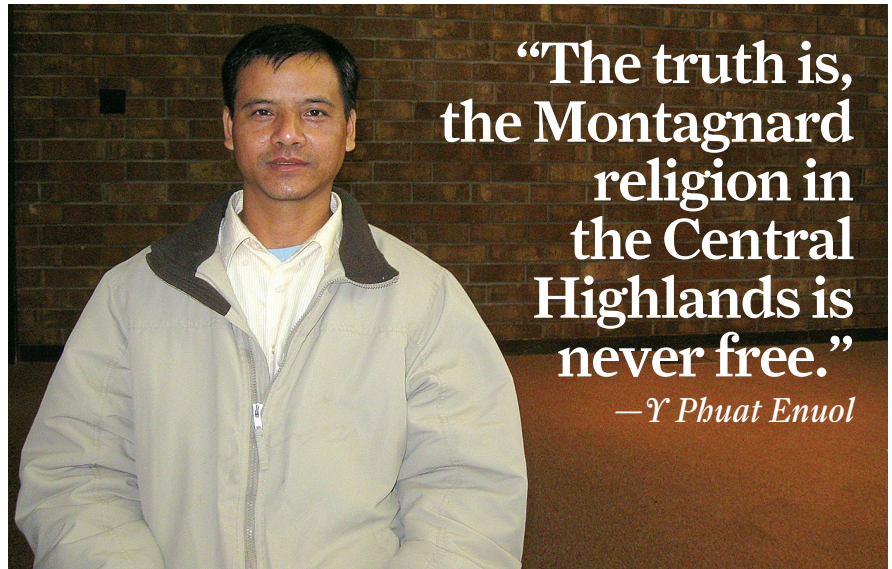
After USCIRF officials visited Vietnam in May, commissioner Michael

Cromartie testified before Congress that the group had documented detention of religious prisoners, severe restrictions on independent religious activity, and a government policy of intimidating new converts and suppressing the growth of religious groups.

Cromartie also testified about some improvements, including the release of some prisoners and more toleration for public worship in urban areas. The commissioner attributed those improvements to the State Department's CPC designation of Vietnam from 2004 to 2006, but he said conditions had deteriorated since the United States removed the country from the list. Cromartie says the department should return Vietnam to the list this year. He dis-

It's not clear what impact the congressional pressure will have on the State Department, though as a senator last February, Barack Obama wrote a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, asking the State Department to reevaluate its position on Vietnam in light of ongoing religious and human-rights abuses. USCIRF has called on President Obama to exert the same pressure now.

In the meantime, refugees continue to trickle into the United States from the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Aid organizations like Lutheran Family Services and World Relief help many Montagnards resettle. Rong Nay of the Raleigh-based Montagnard Human Rights Organization (MHRO) helps



agrees with Michalak's assessment that there isn't enough evidence.

Some members of Congress agree. Rep. Ed Royce, R-Calif., introduced an amendment to a Foreign Relations bill that called on the State Department to return Vietnam to the CPC list. "Some have seen positive steps in Vietnam, but frankly, I don't see it," said Royce. "Religious freedom remains under attack."

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., is leading efforts to pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act, a resolution that details human-rights abuses and that would tie non-humanitarian foreign aid levels to progress in improving human-rights conditions. Back in July, 37 senators signed a letter demanding the release of Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, a Catholic priest who's been imprisoned a total of 17 years since 1970.

too. A Montagnard himself, Nay leads the group's efforts to help with immigration and reunification for Montagnard families, as well as other refugee groups. The group also brings attention to human-rights issues in the Central Highlands.

Nay says if the State Department doesn't put Vietnam back on the CPC list, "the situation in the Central Highlands will worsen." He says he understands U.S. concerns over defense and trade agreements with Vietnam, but hopes that U.S. officials "will parallel those concerns with human rights."

Kay Reibold, the group's project development specialist, says keeping Vietnam off the list won't help the country—or its citizens—in the long run: "You're sending the wrong message if you keep reinforcing bad behavior." 🌐