

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 10, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We are writing to you in advance of the planned summit hosted by the United States with the leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on February 15-16 in Rancho Mirage, California. This US-ASEAN summit—the first of its kind—is a critical opportunity for your administration to deepen engagement with the ten ASEAN member countries that are the heart of an economically and strategically vital region.

The United States and ASEAN launched a strategic partnership in November 2015 which heralds, among other elements, a shared "commitment to strengthening democracy, enhancing good governance and the rule of law, [and] promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms." As Members of Congress deeply concerned with the condition of human rights in Southeast Asia, we urge you to place human rights among your highest priorities on the summit agenda and encourage you to include robust participation by civil society organizations in the program.

In recent years, as part of your administration's rebalance to Asia, the United States has more deeply engaged with nations in Southeast Asia on political, security, and economic issues. Despite increasing economic and strategic ties, we have seen a marked lack of progress, and in some nations, backsliding on human rights in the region. The ten members of ASEAN have a varying and worrisome human rights record, for example:

- Vietnam, a one-party state, continues to jail human rights activists and suppresses religious freedom, workers' rights, free speech, and freedom of the press.
- Cambodia's government, headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen for over thirty years, has continually harassed and intimidated Cambodia's political opposition and is investigating the leader of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party.
- Same-sex acts are illegal in four ASEAN countries and punishable by death in Brunei.
- Thailand has been ruled by a military junta since a 2014 coup, and efforts to restore democracy have been halting and uneven.
- While Burma has just conducted historic elections, the Rohingya people continue to face widespread persecution and displacement.

- In Laos, space for civil society continues to shrink, while the case of the forced disappearance of civil society leader Sombath Somphone in 2012 remains unresolved.

These are only some of the most salient human rights abuses in ASEAN nations. We strongly urge you to make human rights a key part of the agenda at the US-ASEAN summit, press ASEAN countries to commit to improving their human rights records, and engage human rights groups and civil society from these countries as part of the summit.

Thank you for your attention to our concerns. We look forward to your response and the opportunity to work with you on these pressing issues.

Sincerely,



ALAN LOWENTHAL
Member of Congress



ELIOT L. ENGEL
Member of Congress



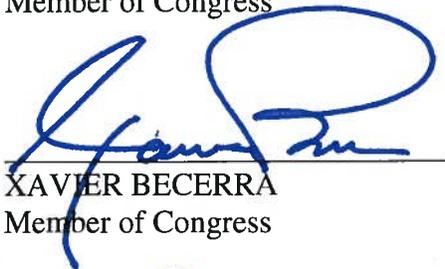
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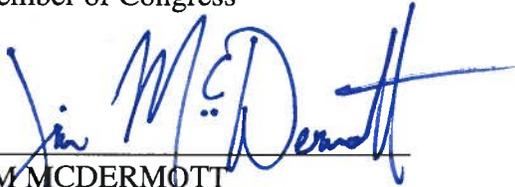
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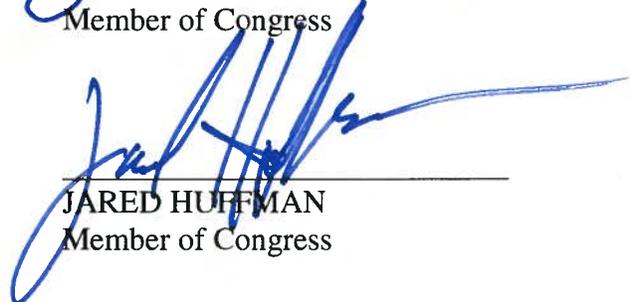
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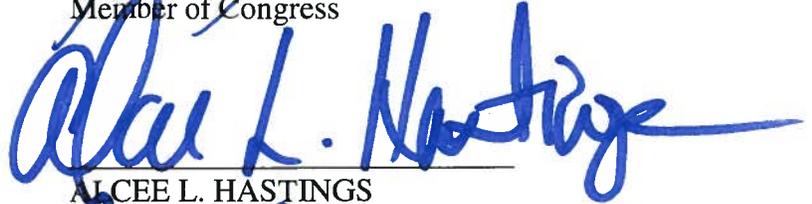
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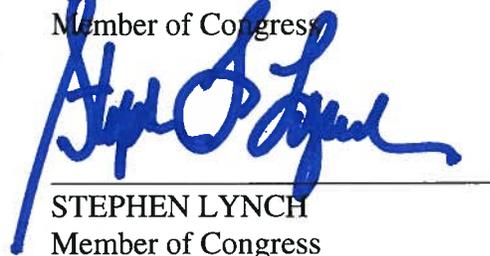
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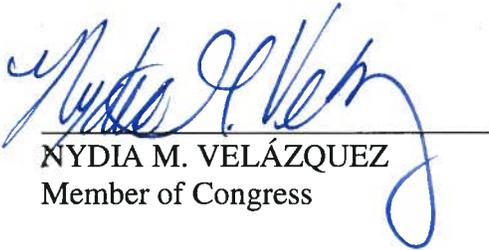
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