

Vietnam: New Round of Arrests Target Democracy Activists *Prominent Blogger Sentenced to Prison*

(New York, September 12, 2008) – Human Rights Watch condemned a crackdown on democracy activists in Vietnam this week, coinciding with the visit of US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte for bilateral talks on security issues, economic ties, and human rights.

Human Rights Watch also called for the immediate release from prison of a prominent internet writer and activist, Nguyen Hoang Hai, known by his pen name Dieu Cay, who was sentenced to 30 months in prison on September 10, 2008. Following Dieu Cay's closed-door trial, police detained and interrogated at least a dozen other democracy activists, bloggers, and human rights defenders.

“Vietnam's government is well-known for having zero tolerance for free expression,” said Elaine Pearson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The current wave of arrests of democracy activists is a thinly veiled effort by the government to silence independent bloggers, journalists, and human rights defenders in Vietnam.”

Many of the activists detained this week, like Dieu Cay, have participated in protests against China's claims to the disputed Spratly (Truong Sa) and Paracel (Hoang Sa) islands. It is thought that Vietnamese authorities are possibly trying to prevent demonstrations on the issue planned for September 14. The authorities may also be trying to thwart high-profile activists from joining mass prayer vigils that have been staged since mid-August in Hanoi by thousands of Catholics, who want the government to return confiscated church land in Thai Ha Parish.

Dieu Cay (which means “the Peasant Water Pipe”), 56, is known for his hard-hitting internet postings calling for greater democracy and human rights in Vietnam and his participation in protests in Vietnam against Chinese foreign policy. A former soldier with the People's Army of Vietnam, Dieu Cay was one of the founding members of the Club of Free Journalists (Cau Lac Bo Nha Bao Tu Do) in 2006.

Anti-China Protests

Since December 2007, growing numbers of activists in Vietnam have joined rallies protesting China's claims to the disputed Spratly and Paracel islands, over which both China and Vietnam assert sovereignty. The protests were sparked by China's November 2007 announcement that it was placing the islands under the administration of a new government district.

In January 2008, Dieu Cay and six other activists unfurled banners in front of the Opera House in Ho Chi Minh City criticizing China for its claims to the disputed islands. On April 19, 2008, police arrested Dieu Cay in Dalat, a city in central Vietnam, shortly before the arrival of the Olympic Torch in Ho Chi Minh City, an event the Vietnamese authorities were determined to ensure was protest-free. Prior to his arrest, police had summoned Dieu Cay for interrogation at least 15 times.

On September 10, a court in Ho Chi Minh City sentenced Dieu Cay to two and half years in prison on charges of tax evasion on a rental property he owns. Dieu Cay's lawyers argued that the renter, not Dieu Cay, was liable for back taxes owed on the property, because the rental contract provided for the renter to assume payment of all property taxes, which is allowable under Vietnamese law.

Police officers from the Internal Security and Counter-Espionage Departments (Cuc An Ninh Noi Chinh and Cuc Phan Gian) of the Ministry of Public Security in Ho Chi Minh City arrested Dieu Cay. This department is primarily responsible for monitoring and intervening in political cases. International press freedom organizations called the tax evasion charges a baseless pretext to punish Dieu Cay for his political activism.

"It's bad enough that the Vietnamese government took an anti-China activist off the street only days before the Olympic torch passed through Ho Chi Minh City, but to imprison him now on questionable charges is a new low," said Pearson.

Internet and media controls

Dieu Cay's imprisonment fits a wider pattern of harassment and arrest by Vietnamese authorities of independent journalists, human rights activists, cyber dissidents, religious freedom advocates, and farmers protesting confiscation of their land. The Vietnamese government tightly controls the print and electronic media, as well as the internet in Vietnam, and is swift to prosecute dissidents and independent writers.

In May 2008, for example, police arrested two investigative reporters who had exposed a major corruption scandal in 2005. The reporters, Nguyen Viet Chien of *Thanh Nien* (Young People) newspaper and Nguyen Van Hai of *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) newspaper, were charged with "abusing their positions and powers while performing official duties." After their newspapers publicly challenged the arrests, on August 1, the government revoked the press accreditation of four journalists from the two papers, including both publications' deputy editors.

Vietnam's Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Vietnam is a state party, grant citizens the right to exercise freedom of expression, assembly and association.

"The Vietnamese government should take its own laws seriously and tolerate the expression of views it does not share," Pearson said. "It's time for Hanoi to cease harassing and arresting cyber dissidents, human rights defenders, and independent journalists."

Background information

Activists arrested and detained by police on September 10 and 11 include:

- Land rights protesters **Lu Thi Thu Duyen**, **Lu Thi Thu Trang**, and **Hoac Kim Hoa**, who were detained and interrogated by police in Ho Chi Minh City on September 10 after they tried to attend Dieu Cay's trial;

- Human rights defender **Pham Van Troi**, 35, an active member of the Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam, who was arrested in Hanoi just before midnight on September 10;
- Writer **Nguyen Xuan Nghia**, 58, a member of the executive board of the democracy movement known as Bloc 8406 (named after the April 8, 2006 date of its inception by Father Nguyen Van Ly) was arrested at his home in Haiphong just after midnight on September 11;
- Land rights activist **Pham Thanh Nghien**, who was arrested by 10 police officers at 11 a.m. on September 11 at her home in Haiphong and taken to Hanoi for questioning by police. In June 2008, municipal authorities in Hanoi rejected an application submitted by **Nguyen Xuan Nghia**, **Pham Van Troi** and **Pham Thanh Nghien** to conduct a demonstration protesting China's occupation of the Paracel and Spratly islands;
- Student **Ngo Quynh** and poet **Tran Duc Thach**, who were arrested in Hanoi on September 10 as they were on their way to Thai Ha parish, where a mass rally by Catholics protesting government policy is taking place;
- Democracy activist **Nguyen Van Tuc**, a Bloc 8406 member, who was arrested in a midnight raid by dozens of police at his home in Thai Binh province on September 11;
- **Vu Hung**, who was dismissed from his job as a high school physics teacher two months ago because of his contacts with Vietnamese democracy activists and who was arrested at his home in Ha Tay province at 8 p.m. on September 11; and
- Bloggers **Uyen Vu** and **Quynh Vi**, who were summoned to the police station in Ho Chi Minh City for interrogation on September 11.

In addition, on September 10, authorities in Hanoi charged four Catholic protesters from Thai Ha Parish who were arrested on August 28: **Nguyen Thi Nhi**, **Nguyen Duc Hung**, **Nguyen Thi Viet**, and **Thai Thanh Hai**.

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