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The human rights situation in Vietnam remains of concern and is largely unchanged from the last report.

The UK is disappointed that the Vietnamese government asked the UK to postpone a planned joint UK-New Zealand death penalty event in April. The event would have enabled a range of participants, including civil society, NGOs and Vietnamese officials, to debate the death penalty.

The UK was pleased to attend the National Assembly debate in June on the proposal to reduce the number of offences which carry the death penalty from 22 to 15. At the debate, the majority of the National Assembly speakers were against the proposal. A decision will be made in October.

The UK continues to follow closely the case of Ho Duy Hai, who was sentenced to death for the murder of two postal workers in Long An province in March 2008. The UK, alongside international and Vietnamese public groups, is concerned about the lack of clear evidence against Hai. He was due to be executed in December 2014, but was granted a stay of execution following strong advocacy efforts. British Embassy officials met his family in February and March to listen to their concerns regarding the case, and to offer our support. We wrote to President Truong Tan Sang to highlight our and the families' concerns. The case is now under review following President Sang's decision to investigate the claims. The UK, through the EU and with like-minded countries, also wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March calling for Hai's family members to have access, an investigation into allegations that Hai has been subjected to torture in custody, and a revocation of the death sentence. The EU is pressing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a response.

At the end of March, Hanoi saw a well-coordinated public protest movement against a proposal to cut down 6,700 trees in Hanoi. The issue quickly attracted many supporters, who called for a halt to the plans and asked for greater transparency and accountability. Several hundred people took part in regular weekend demonstrations, and a parallel Facebook campaign received over 62,000 likes. Initially, the protests passed off peacefully, winning enormous support from the public, the media, and academia, and leading to the Chairman of Hanoi's People's Committee agreeing to postpone the plans in order to allow a review. However, around mid-April, the authorities

adopted a tougher position towards the tree protests; police arrested demonstrators, universities received orders to keep their students away from demonstrations, and two well-known democracy activists, who had been participating in the protests, were attacked.

In April, blogger Trinh Anh Tuan was attacked while riding his motorbike in Hanoi. He required 10 stitches to his head. He stated that he believes he was assaulted by state security because he led calls for more transparency from officials involved in dealing with the tree protest movement.

Similarly, in May, human rights activist Nguyen Chi Tuyen, known as Anh Chi, was attacked with iron bars by five plain-clothed people as he was collecting his child from school in Hanoi. He was taken to hospital and required a 6cm suture to his head. Nguyen Chi Tuyen is also part of a group opposed to China's presence in the Spratly Islands.

The UK is encouraged by the fact that, as part of the tree protest campaign, there has been a high level of coordination between registered NGOs and civil society groups; people have been able to demonstrate peacefully and, by making their voices heard, they have had an impact on public policy-making. The UK is concerned at the violent attacks on Tuan and Tuyen, and believes in an individual's right to freedom of expression and assembly.

Human rights defenders Pham Minh Vu, Le Thi Phuong Anh and Do Nam Trung were sentenced in February in Dong Nai to 18, 12 and 14 months respectively, under Article 258 of Vietnam's penal code, for the "abuse of democratic freedoms to attack state interests and the legitimate rights and interests of collectives and citizens". They were also charged with slandering the Vietnamese government online. They were arrested in May 2014 while filming anti-China demonstrations and accused of using these videos and photos to disseminate incorrect information and of creating social unrest.

In March, blogger Doan Trang was detained and taken to an unknown location by plain-clothed men, whom she believes were police, on her way to a meeting with the EU delegation and other embassies. The meeting was to discuss potential miscarriages of justice, including the Ho Duy Hai case. Trang was released later that evening.

Bloggers Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, known also as Me Nam (Mother Mushroom), and Vo Truong Thien were detained in Khanh Hoa police station on their way to a meeting with the German delegation to the International Parliamentary Union. They too were released later that evening.

In May, Kim Quoc Hoa, the editor-in-chief of the state-controlled newspaper The Elderly, was prosecuted under Article 258 of Vietnam's penal code for "publishing articles that disseminated false information and revealed confidential information related to national security". The Elderly had previously posted a number of articles on corruption issues, including some critical of government officials.

Bloggers Hong Le Tho and Nguyen Quang Lap, whose cases were highlighted in the 2014 September-December update, were released in February following two months' detention. Lap was released pending further investigation. The UK raised these cases with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the context of wider concerns about freedom of expression in Vietnam.

Journalist Nguyen Van Khuong, known as Hoang Khuong, was released in January, after three years in prison. He was sentenced to four years in 2012 for conspiracy to bribe a public official after he filmed an associate bribing a traffic police officer. The footage provided material for a series of articles highlighting police corruption for the newspaper Tuoi Tre.

The UK welcomes the release of these prisoners, but remains concerned that politically motivated harassment, detention, arrest and conviction continue, as do restrictions on the media. It is important that all individuals and organisations should be able to exercise their fundamental right to freedom of expression peacefully, and without arrest or harassment.

In March, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, published his report on his July 2014 visit to Vietnam. The UK agrees with his comments that the Vietnamese authorities should not have interrupted part of his visit; this was against the premise of inviting a Special Rapporteur to the country.

The UK supports the recommendations of the report, in particular that Vietnamese legislation referring to freedom of religion or belief needs to be clearer, and all religious groups should be recognised. We hope that the Vietnamese authorities will engage both with relevant domestic actors, including civil society, and with the international community, on the process of implementing these recommendations. The UK stands ready to provide support.

In March, The Cabinet, an NGO-sponsored exhibition, told the stories of more than 70 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Vietnam through a series of sculptures and installations. In June, an ASEAN PRIDE festival was held in Hanoi with bands from Vietnam and across the region performing to promote LGB&T rights. The UK was part of a senior diplomatic group which provided public support for ASEAN PRIDE.

In Ho Chi Minh City, from 26 March to 1 April, a large number of workers gathered to demonstrate against changes to insurance law. The protests, which some reported as involving 90,000 people, went ahead peacefully, and a senior official met protestors to hear their concerns. In June, a National Assembly session debated the issue and approved a change in the workers' favour.

In March, an event to commemorate the deaths of Vietnamese soldiers in the Spratly Islands in 1988 was disrupted when people attempted to stop the wreath laying. Participants at the event in Hanoi claimed those who disrupted the event were identifiable by their clothing as government informants; but the government denied that the group was state-controlled. A similar event in Ho Chi Minh City passed off peacefully.

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