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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2013: Vietnam - Country of Concern update

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The human rights situation in Vietnam has deteriorated over the last three months, despite their seat on the UN Human Rights Council and increasing scrutiny during the Universal Periodic Review on 5 February. Use of the death penalty and harassment of human rights activists continue. There has been a growing trend of assaults on human rights defenders following meetings with diplomats, and an increasing number of high-profile trials of activists. However, despite official harassment and restrictions on their travel, Vietnamese civil society continued to develop its voice, speaking in Geneva and Brussels, and organising events to discuss the human rights situation.

On 20 January, in Quang Ninh province, 30 individuals were sentenced to death following a single trial for smuggling drugs. The UK supported an [EU statement at the time condemning the outcome and calling for a moratorium to be enacted](#).

Evidence concerning the number of executions that have taken place since their resumption during the last quarter remains scarce. Details of executions and those on death row are not discussed in state media.

Lord Dubs, Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Death Penalty, visited Hanoi on 17 February. He met a variety of government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Public Security, as well as Vietnamese civil society groups working against the death penalty. His aim was to discuss the scope for reducing the number of crimes and inspire increased debate on the issue. His visit has prompted a series of workshops between officials, civil society and the embassy on the death penalty; organisation of these is currently underway.

There are serious concerns that activity by parts of Vietnam's security establishment is undermining Vietnam's commitment to its human rights obligations, in particular under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which it signed on 7 November 2013. The last quarter has seen a rising trend in the use of the security and judicial apparatus to control political dissent, particularly by disrupting meetings between activists and diplomats.

Meetings with diplomats provide a platform for activists and raise the profile of their concerns to the wider Vietnamese society. By disrupting them, Vietnam is seeking to limit dissent through intimidation. Throughout February, Nguyen Bac Truyen, a human rights defender, was repeatedly detained and attacked, including whilst travelling to a meeting with Australian diplomats. Members of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) prevented a meeting between a German diplomat and another activist, filming the participants. Further disruption continued in March when two human rights seminars organised by Vietnamese Civil Society were halted by the MPS – the second, in Hanoi, included members of the diplomatic community. In these cases there was clear involvement by state security. However, there have been numerous other incidents where we assess it likely that security services were responsible. This is based on the evidence of victims, including diplomats, the nature of the target and the known intentions of the state to control dissent.

The UK believes human rights defenders should not have to fear for their safety or security when meeting diplomats or other interested parties. In the aftermath of these disruptions, the UK Ambassador raised the issue of assaults on activists meeting foreign diplomats with the Vietnamese government. The UK will continue to meet human rights defenders and other parts of civil society in Vietnam, supporting their right to express their opinions peacefully.

The other area of concern relates to the use of the law courts of Vietnam as a tool to suppress political dissent. On 18 February, blogger Le Quoc Quan's sentence of 30 months' imprisonment for tax evasion was upheld following a four-hour appeal hearing. We assess that he was imprisoned for expressing opinions about freedom of religion, corruption and land reform issues, and that the sentencing and decisions of his trial and subsequent appeal were neither fair nor transparent. After the trial, security officers inside the court used force to prevent Quan's wife from speaking with

diplomats. The UK issued a [statement](#) following the outcome of Quan’s trial, reminding Vietnam of its obligations to uphold freedom of expression. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

In March several critics of the regime were given prison sentences citing Article 258 of Vietnam’s penal code for the misuse of “democratic freedoms to attack state interests and the legitimate rights and interests of collectives and citizens”. The bloggers Pham Viet Dao and Truong Duy Nhat were sentenced to 15 and 24 months respectively – the former having already served nine months awaiting trial. Each ran blogs that expressed political opinions critical of the Vietnamese government. In addition, Hoang Van Sang was sentenced to 18 months for opposing a government campaign forcing the Hmong ethnic minority group to return to older funeral practices.

The UK is concerned about the trend of high-profile cases which have been tried over the last three months, where indications are that the law and court procedures have been used to target known critics of the authorities.

A positive element of the last three months is the continuing resilience of civil society groups, both within and outside Vietnam, to find ways of promoting human rights. The UK will continue to support these efforts and meet representatives in order to highlight their cause.

It should also be noted that on 20 February representatives of the International Secretariat of Amnesty International met the Vietnamese government in Hanoi to discuss a range of human rights issues. This was a positive development and we welcome the Vietnamese government’s invitation to Amnesty to make follow-up visits.

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