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Head of state: **Truong Tan Sang**

Head of government: **Nguyen Tan Dung**

Repression of government critics and activists worsened, with severe restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly. At least 25 peaceful dissidents, including bloggers and songwriters, were sentenced to long prison terms in 14 trials that failed to meet international standards. Members of ethnic and religious groups faced human rights violations. At least 86 people were sentenced to death, with more than 500 on death row.

Background

A political crisis arose over alleged mishandling of the economy, with high inflation and debt levels, and corruption scandals linked to state businesses. A secret "criticism" and "self-criticism" programme in the ruling Communist Party lasted for several months. The Prime Minister publicly apologized for economic mismanagement, but retained his position. Public consultations were announced on amending the 1992 Constitution, and on gay marriage. An escalation of the territorial conflict with China in the East Sea (also known as the South China Sea) resulted in anti-China demonstrations in Viet Nam. Reports of land disputes and violent forced evictions increased. Viet Nam announced it would run for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council in 2014-2016. In November, Viet Nam adopted the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, despite serious concerns that it fell short of international standards.

Freedom of expression

Repression of dissent and attacks on the rights to freedom of expression and assembly continued. Short-term arrests of people taking part in peaceful demonstrations occurred, including in June, when 30 farmers were arrested after protesting for three days outside government buildings in Ha Noi about being forcibly evicted three years earlier.

- In September, the Prime Minister called for greater controls on the internet and ordered legal action to be taken against three named blogs after they reported on the political crisis.

Vaguely worded provisions of the national security section of the 1999 Penal Code were used to criminalize peaceful political and social dissent. By the end of the year, dozens of peaceful political, social and religious activists were in pre-trial detention or had been imprisoned. They included Nguyen Phuong Uyen, a 20-year-old student arrested in October for distributing anti-government leaflets.

Prisoners of conscience

At least 27 prisoners of conscience (detained before 2012) remained held. They included Father Nguyen Van Ly, a Catholic priest serving an eight-year sentence for advocating human rights, freedom of speech and political change.

Bloggers

Long prison terms were handed down to bloggers in an apparent attempt to silence others. They were charged with "conducting propaganda" and aiming to "overthrow" the government. Dissidents were held in lengthy pre-trial detention, often incommunicado and sometimes beyond the period allowed under Vietnamese law. Reports of beatings during interrogation emerged. Trials failed to meet international standards of fairness, with no presumption of innocence, lack of effective defence, and no opportunity to call witnesses. Families of defendants were harassed by local security forces, prevented from attending trials and sometimes lost their work and education opportunities.

- Well-known popular bloggers Nguyen Van Hai, known as Dieu Cay, "Justice and Truth" blogger Ta Phong Tan, and Phan Thanh Hai, known as AnhBaSaiGon, were tried in September for "conducting propaganda" against the state. They were sentenced to 12, 10 and four years' imprisonment respectively, with three to five years' house arrest on release. The trial lasted only a few hours, and their families were harassed and detained to prevent them from attending. Their trial was postponed three times, the last time because the mother of Ta Phong Tan died after setting herself on fire outside government offices in protest at her daughter's treatment. Phan Thanh Hai's sentence was reduced by one year on appeal in December.
- Environmental activist and blogger Dinh Dang Dinh, was sentenced to six years' imprisonment in August after a three-hour trial. He was charged with "conducting propaganda" against the state for initiating a petition against bauxite mining in the Central Highlands. His wife reported that he was in poor health and had been beaten by prison officers.

Ethnic and religious minorities

Ethnic and religious minority groups perceived to oppose the government remained at risk of harassment, arrest and imprisonment. Those targeted included ethnic groups worshipping at unauthorized churches and others involved in protests over land confiscation by the authorities. A group of 14 Catholic bloggers and social activists arrested between July and December 2011 in Nghe An province remained in pre-trial detention.

- In March, Nguyen Cong Chinh, a Mennonite pastor, was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment for "undermining the national unity policy". He was accused of "inciting" ethnic minorities. He spoke out about harassment by local authorities and restrictions on religious freedom in the Central Highlands. In October, his wife claimed that she had not been allowed to visit him since his arrest in April 2011.

- Twelve ethnic Hmong accused of involvement in major unrest in north-west Viet Nam in May 2011, were tried and sentenced to between two and seven years' imprisonment in March and December for "disrupting security" and aiming to "overthrow the government". No clear account of events was given and the authorities prevented access to the alleged area of unrest.
- The Supreme Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam, Thich Quang Do, aged 85, remained under house arrest. In July, he called for peaceful demonstrations against China's actions in the East Sea. Police surrounded the banned monasteries to prevent members from participating.
- Three Catholic Youth members were tried in September and sentenced to between 30 and 42 months in prison for "conducting propaganda" against the state. They had participated in anti-China protests, and signed petitions against the trial of prominent dissident Cu Huy Ha Vu.

Death penalty

In November, an official stated that 508 prisoners were on death row, with around 100 ready to be executed. A delay in implementation of the use of lethal injection, due to an EU ban on export of the required drugs, resulted in no executions being carried out since July 2011. More than 86 people were sentenced to death, including two men for embezzlement.

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