



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Vietnam

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January 2011 saw the reappointment of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung for a second five-year term in the Politburo of Vietnam's Communist Party (CPV), the ruling party in this tightly controlled one-party state.

Vietnam officially recognizes 54 ethnic groups, among whom the majority ethnic Kinh make up 86 per cent of the population. Ethnic minority and indigenous groups have significant populations in the northern highlands, central highlands and the Mekong delta region – including Hmong, Khmer, Muong, Tay and Thai. In the central highlands, in Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces in particular, about two dozen indigenous groups collectively self-identify as Montagnards, many of whom are also Protestant Christians.

Vietnam's central highlands are rich in natural resources, including bauxite. In September, a Chinese-backed bauxite mine in Lam Dong province began operations, despite unusually high levels of public criticism about environmental consequences and Chinese involvement. Bauxite is a mineral used to produce aluminum, and, with the third largest reserve of bauxite in the world, the government has shown little regard for the concerns of central highland peoples, including over potential contamination of water resources as well as adverse impact on crops.

Land in Vietnam is state-owned – with individual land use rights – and can be re-appropriated for state interests. With forests and mineral-rich lands in minority and indigenous areas, state land confiscation can have a devastating effect on these communities. In her January 2011 report on her official visit to Vietnam in 2010, the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, noted the massive resettlement caused by the Son La hydropower plant, where 91,000 people belonging to ethnic minorities were relocated by 2010 – the largest resettlement programme in Vietnam's history. Ten different groups have been affected, the majority being ethnic Thai. The Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations reported: '[R]elocation is breaking down existing social structures and community relationships and creating trauma for minority groups.... Most are left without any agricultural land.'

In May, seven land rights defenders, some of whom also struggle for religious freedom, were tried for 'subversion' in the Ben Tre People's Court; all received prison sentences ranging from two to eight years. Pastor Duong Kim Khai was one of those found guilty. A leader of the Mennonite 'Cattle Shed' religious group – so-called because their church was confiscated by authorities and

they began using a shed for worship – has assisted people in the Mekong delta with land rights claims.

The government maintains strict controls on freedom of religion, permitting only state-sanctioned religions, and using complex registration requirements, surveillance and intimidation to control the practice of faith. Religious activists and those practising 'unauthorized' religions are targeted by the government. In July, police arrested three Catholic activists as they returned from a conference abroad. Twelve more religious activists were arrested by the end of September, the majority of whom were later charged with 'subversion'. In December, Nguyen Van Lia, a 71-year-old who has raised international awareness about the situation faced by fellow-members of the Hoa Hao Buddhists, was sentenced to five years in prison for distributing 'anti-government' propaganda.

Vietnamese authorities continued to use violence and intimidation in the central highlands and north-west provinces, especially against Protestant ethnic minorities and others conducting 'unsanctioned' religious practices. Since the state restricts foreign media in these areas, it is difficult to get a clear picture. HRW, however, reported that thousands of Hmong Christians began protesting in the north-west province of Dien Bien at the end of April. This was met by a violent response from the military, with unconfirmed reports of numerous deaths and injuries. According to the BBC, the protesters demanded more religious freedom, secure land rights and greater autonomy.

Unrest over land rights and the struggle for religious freedom in the central highlands during the last decade has made the area a security concern for the government. In a 2011 report, HRW detailed how security forces have used violence, arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and torture, as well as forced public renunciations of faith and declarations of allegiance to the state, against indigenous Montagnards. HRW further reported that since 2001, more than 350 Montagnards have been imprisoned for public protests, attending unregistered house churches or trying to flee to seek asylum in Cambodia.

Vietnam has, however, demonstrated a sustained effort to collect disaggregated data on its ethnic minority populations in order to implement more effective development projects. In 2011 a recent study by the government in conjunction with UN agencies reaffirmed that ethnic minorities in Vietnam have worse health indicators, particularly for minority women, who had less access to reproductive health care than their majority counterparts.

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