



## VIET NAM

### SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM

#### Taken from the Amnesty International Report 2007

Head of state: Nguyen Minh Triet (replaced Tran Duc Luong in June)

Head of government: Nguyen Tan Dung (replaced Phan Van Khai in June)

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: not ratified

Restrictions on freedom of expression and association continued. Members of unauthorized churches seen as opposing state policies faced harassment. Dissidents using the Internet were harassed, threatened and imprisoned. Small groups of ethnic minority Montagnards continued to flee human rights violations in the Central Highlands and seek asylum in neighbouring Cambodia; at least 250 remained imprisoned after unfair trials in Viet Nam. Despite proposals to limit the scope of the death penalty, at least 36 death sentences and 14 executions were reported.

#### BACKGROUND

In February the ruling Communist Party of Viet Nam (CPV) for the first time invited public comments on the draft Political Report before its adoption at the party's National Congress. The report outlined guidelines and policies for national construction, party building and a law-governed socialist state until 2010. In April the Congress elected a new politburo and central committee.

A major reshuffle of the government leadership took place in June, with the appointment of a new President, Prime Minister and Chairperson of the National Assembly.

Public concern about corruption scandals increased, in particular one involving senior officials at the Ministry of Transport and police officials.

Four prisoner amnesties resulted in the release of 19,914 prisoners, including two prisoners of conscience.

The Supreme Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam, Thich Huyen Quang, 87, exiled for 24 years in remote provinces, was allowed to travel to Ho Chi Minh City for medical treatment and to recover briefly at the Giac Hoa Pagoda there. His deputy, Thich Quang Do, 77, was awarded Norway's Rafto Prize in November for his "personal courage and perseverance through three decades of peaceful opposition".

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Trade negotiations were a major focus during the year. Viet Nam hosted APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) meetings, culminating in a November summit of economic leaders including US President Bush for the first time. During this time harassment and threats against leading dissidents increased and attempts were made to ensure that they could not meet or talk with foreigners. The US Congress voted to confer Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) in December. Negotiations for entry into the World Trade Organization were finalized in November.

## RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE INTERNET

Political dissidents, including those using the Internet to talk about human rights, democracy and political change, were harassed, threatened and imprisoned under national security legislation. The authorities increased efforts to tighten control of the Internet through new regulations, monitoring by Internet café owners and Internet Service Providers, and by filtering and blocking websites.

### BLOC 8406

Despite these constraints, in April activists launched an online petition signed by 118 democracy activists calling for peaceful political change and respect for human rights. This Internet-based pro-democracy movement became known as Group 8406, or Bloc 8406. A further 2,000 people went on to sign the petition. Several of the original signatories subsequently faced harassment, interrogation, restrictions on movement and confiscation of computers for attempting to publish a bulletin named Freedom and Democracy (To Do Dan Chu).

- Truong Quoc Huy, 25, was arrested with two of his brothers and a young woman in October 2005 after taking part in a chat room hosted by the PalTalk website entitled "The voice of people in Viet Nam and Abroad". He was detained incommunicado for nine months until his release in July. After his release he publicly supported Bloc 8406 and was rearrested in an Internet café in Ho Chi Minh City in August after logging on to the PalTalk website. He has reportedly been charged under Article 88 of the Criminal Code for "conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam."

- Internet dissident Nguyen Vu Binh, arrested in September 2002 and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, remained in prison at the end of the year. Dr Pham Hong Son and Nguyen Khac Toan were released from prison under amnesties into a three-year period of "probation", including interrogations, severe restrictions on freedom of movement, association and expression.

## CENTRAL HIGHLANDS/MONTAGNARDS

Human rights violations against ethnic minority Montagnards in the Central Highlands continued. These included restrictions on movement and forcing Christians belonging to unauthorized house churches to renounce their religion. Reports of arrests and ill-treatment continued. More than 250 Montagnards sentenced to lengthy prison terms in connection with the 2001 and 2004 protests around land ownership and religious freedom remained imprisoned.

In April, two Montagnard students were reportedly arrested and detained for 18 days in a district prison in Dak Lak province, where they were interrogated and beaten by police. The two were accused of sending lists of political prisoners abroad via the Internet.

Small groups of Montagnards attempted to seek asylum in neighbouring Cambodia, where their situation was precarious. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Viet Nam, Cambodia and the UN refugee agency UNHCR, signed in January 2005 to resolve the situation of asylum-seekers, remained in place. It appeared to have been violated by the Vietnamese authorities, with reports that in some cases people who had returned from Cambodia to Viet Nam under the MOU were detained, interrogated and ill-treated.

- In June, six members of the E De and M'nong ethnic groups were sentenced to between three and seven years' imprisonment on charges of violating "national unity policies" and organizing illegal migration. They were accused of inciting people to public unrest and assisting others to flee to Cambodia.

## DEATH PENALTY

In February the Ministry of Public Security proposed limiting the scope of the death penalty. A proposal submitted for consideration to the central judicial reform commission recommended that economic crimes such as fraud and embezzlement, smuggling, counterfeiting and bribery should no longer be capital offences. It was reported that this would reduce the number of capital offences from 29 to 20. Some discussion by legislators took place in the National Assembly. However, by the end of the year the proposal had not become law. At least five women and six men convicted of economic crimes were believed to remain on death row.

According to media monitoring at least 36 death sentences were imposed and 14 executions carried out, including five women, the majority for drug trafficking offences. The true number is believed to be much higher. Classification of statistics on the death penalty as a "state secret" prevented full and transparent reporting.

- Phung Long That, the former head of the anti-smuggling investigating division of Ho Chi Minh City customs department, was executed by firing squad in March. He had been sentenced to death in April 1999 after being convicted of accepting bribes and smuggling goods worth US\$70 million.

## AI COUNTRY REPORTS/VISITS

### Reports

- Socialist Republic of Viet Nam: Duong Quang Tri - Sentenced to death for fraud (AI Index: ASA 41/004/2006)
- Socialist Republic of Viet Nam: A tightening net - Web-based repression and censorship (AI Index: ASA 41/008/2006)