



From the Amnesty International Report 2009

Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Head of state **Nguyen Minh Triet**

Head of government **Nguyen Tan Dung**

Death penalty status **retentionist**

Population **88.5 million**

Life expectancy **73.7 years**

Under-5 mortality (m/f) **26/29 per 1,000**

Adult literacy **90.3 per cent**

A crackdown on dissidents continued with severe restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly. Political activists were arrested and detained; others remained in prison after being sentenced under national security legislation. Religious groups were discriminated against, including attacks against Catholics peacefully protesting over a land dispute with the state. More than 200 ethnic minority Montagnards fled to neighbouring Cambodia seeking asylum from persecution. The National Assembly rejected Government proposals to limit the scope of the death penalty.

Freedom of expression

At least 11 peaceful activists received prison sentences, bringing the number of dissidents imprisoned to 30 since a crackdown began in November 2006. Most were supporters of Bloc 8406, an internet-based pro-democracy movement, or other unauthorized groups calling for democracy and human rights. The majority were charged with offences under the national security section of the 1999 Penal Code which carried lengthy prison terms, with additional sentences of up to five years of house arrest on release. An unknown number of dissidents remained in pre-trial detention.

- In January, Truong Quoc Huy was sentenced to six years' imprisonment plus three years' house arrest on release under Article 88 of the Penal Code, "conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam". He was first arrested in October 2005 and held without charge or trial until his release in August 2006; he was rearrested six weeks later after he publicly declared his support for Bloc 8406. Before both arrests he was active on an internet chat room site, discussing the political situation in Viet Nam.

- In May, journalists Nguyen Viet Chien and Nguyen Van Hai were arrested. In October, both were found guilty of “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State...” for reporting since 2005 on a major corruption scandal involving officials from the Ministry of Transport. Nguyen Viet Chien was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment. Nguyen Van Hai received a non-custodial sentence of two years’ re-education after he confessed to the charges.

Freedom of assembly

Since December 2007, members of the Catholic Church in Ha Noi have protested in unprecedented numbers in support of the church’s ownership of two pieces of land which the government claimed to be state-owned. In September, police violently broke up the mass peaceful protests. Several people were injured with batons and 20 people were hospitalized after tear gas was used. Intimidation and harassment of Catholics by security forces and state-sponsored gangs increased in the aftermath.

At least eight protesters arrested in late August were tried on 8 December for “causing public disorder” and “damaging property”. They received non-custodial sentences.

In April, police arrested at least 14 people peacefully demonstrating when the Olympic Torch passed through Ho Chi Minh City; some were released after a few days. Those arrested included Nguyen Hoang Hai, a blogger known as Dieu Cay, who had written articles critical of China’s foreign policies, and advocated for human rights in Viet Nam. He was sentenced to two and a half years’ imprisonment in September for tax evasion, believed to be a politically motivated charge. At least nine dissidents were detained following Dieu Cay’s trial, including writer Nguyen Xuan Nghia who had also been among those arrested in April. They remained in pre-trial detention, reportedly charged under Article 88 of the Penal Code.

Discrimination – religious and ethnic groups

Members of churches not sanctioned by the state continued to face threats, harassment, forced renunciation of their faith, arbitrary detention and imprisonment.

- Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, 87, Supreme Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam (UBCV), died in July while living under restrictions imposed by the authorities. He was a prisoner of conscience who has spent more than 30 years in prison or under house arrest. His deputy, Thich Quang Do, currently under de facto house arrest, became head of the UBCV.

Reports of harassment and ill-treatment of ethnic minority Montagnards in the Central Highlands continued. More than 200 sought asylum in neighbouring Cambodia. An unknown number of Montagnards were still serving lengthy prison sentences in connection with protests in 2001 and 2004.

Death penalty

In November, the Ministry of Justice proposed amendments to the Penal Code to reduce the number of capital offences from 29 to 12. However, the National Assembly rejected the proposal, insisting that the death penalty was necessary to combat serious widespread crime.

According to media sources, at least 19 executions were carried out, and 59 people were sentenced to death. The actual numbers were believed to be much higher.

- Nguyen Minh Hung was released in June after spending more than five years in prison under a death sentence for drug trafficking. Nguyen Minh Hung was initially sentenced to death by the Tay Ninh Provincial People's Court in June 2004, but the Supreme People's Court (SPC) overturned the sentence and ordered further investigation. He was re-tried by the Tay Ninh court and sentenced to death for a second time. In April 2007, the SPC again asked for further investigation. The case was finally dropped due to lack of evidence. A witness in the case said she had lied when identifying Nguyen Minh Hung as an accomplice because of intense pressure from the police.

In December, Viet Nam abstained on a UN General Assembly resolution calling for a worldwide moratorium on executions.