



**CONSERVATIVE PARTY
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Report on Vietnam

**The democracy movement 'Bloc 8406'
and human rights in Vietnam**

From a visit by Rado Tylecote
Conservative Party Human Rights Commission

July – August 2006

The Conservative Party Human Rights Commission is a body established by the Shadow Foreign Secretary to highlight international human rights concerns, and to inform, advise and develop the party's foreign policy by making human rights a priority. Freedom and human dignity should be at the heart of foreign policy.

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Nothing is more important than independence and freedom.

-Ho Chi Minh

1. Executive summary

Vietnam's communist government has given us a great deal of talk about human rights, but virtually no real change.

The low level of coverage the foreign media gives to human rights in Vietnam bears little relation to the very serious lack of freedoms and abuses of human rights in the country. The Vietnamese government relies on attention being given instead to the most egregious and violent abuses of human rights in other countries in the region in the knowledge that it receives little pressure as a result. The facts however, are stark. Reporters Without Borders rates Vietnam in the worst ten countries in the world for press freedom¹. Freedom House gives Vietnam a zero score for political freedoms². These statistics place Vietnam in the company of regimes such as North Korea and Burma. The regime's abuses of human rights remain dire: it appears that as recently as July 13th this year, police in the Central Highland province of Dak Lak tortured a man to death³. In fact, human rights abuses appear to be worsening in response to increasing opposition activity. The regime can no longer be allowed to pretend that it respects the rights of its people.

The 10th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in April 2006 received a good deal of media attention. An audacious simultaneous gathering of democracy activists in Hanoi received little. This meeting on April 4th brought together dissidents from all over Vietnam to form Bloc 8406, a coordinated democracy movement that now has a representative in every province of the country. This is a pivotal development for Vietnam. There is now an organised domestic opposition movement, whose profile is growing among the Vietnamese people as it makes consistent, articulate and courageous demands for human rights. I visited Vietnam from July 27th to August 5th this summer to meet some of the leading activists in Bloc 8406. This report contains details of their views and activities, and what actions the government has taken against them up to the present time. It should be stressed that although Bloc 8406 is an increasingly large group of nearly 2,000 activists, there are many other Vietnamese pro-democracy organisations in and outside the country.

The government's response to the opposition's increasing activity and organisation has included committing more severe abuses in some cases. The harassment of many activists has become more severe since April, although below the publicity-attracting level of further lengthy incarcerations. The government has also accused activists of working for outside forces, accusations that appear to be totally groundless.

Events during and after my visit provide an example of the government's tactics. Notwithstanding the presence of security police outside the locations of my interviews, I was left alone by the authorities throughout my trip and the interviews went ahead unhindered. However shortly after I left, a number of my interviewees were arrested. Some were interrogated for ten hours, some for two days. The police took numerous possessions, including their computers and phones, and surveillance has been markedly increased. Many are under serious threat of re-arrest.

¹ Reporters Without Borders, Worldwide Press Freedom Index, 2005

² Freedom House, Country Report: Vietnam 2005

³ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organisation: Montagnard Degar Christian dies from torture during interrogation about house-church activities, 8th August 2006

As I have argued in this report, the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam should immediately:

- Release all remaining prisoners of conscience
- Release from the threat of imprisonment or re-imprisonment all those who call for democracy in Vietnam
- End the regimes of restricted movement imposed on dissidents, be they ‘city arrests’, ‘district arrests’ or ‘ward arrests’ and stop all forms of harassment of those who call for democracy
- Recognise that the government cannot prevent forever, but only delay, the advent of freedom of politics, speech, thought, association and the press in Vietnam
- In so doing, commit to a timetable for free and fair multi-party elections in Vietnam.

This is a very important time for Vietnam. For the first time since reunification in 1975, a coordinated democracy movement has come together and is courageously working for freedom in the country. As this report details, they have asked for our attention and our help. International actors such as the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union and democratic governments in the region such as Thailand, must now increase pressure on the regime to begin the process of change.

2. About the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission

The United Kingdom’s Conservative Party Human Rights Commission was established in 2005 by the Shadow Foreign Secretary. It exists to monitor human rights concerns in Parliament, the media and other forums in the United Kingdom and the international community, and to develop policies which will promote human rights and democracy. It aims to place the promotion of human rights and democracy at the heart of foreign policy. It consists of 13 Commissioners, including 5 Members of Parliament; Michael Gove MP, John Bercow MP, David Burrowes MP, Mark Pritchard MP, Gerald Howarth MP and the Chairman of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, Gary Streeter MP. Other members include human rights activists, lawyers and researchers. Amnesty International serve as advisers to the Commission, and evidence is taken on a regular basis from other human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch and Freedom House, as well as media and other sources.

Since its foundation in October 2005, the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission has taken Vietnam as one of its ‘countries of focus’. The rationale behind this is two-fold. As described, Vietnam’s government is a serious abuser of human rights, and does not allow the Vietnamese people even the most basic rights and freedoms. However, unlike other regimes in its region, the Vietnamese government’s human rights abuses have received little attention in the western media, creating less pressure than could otherwise be applied to the government to curb its abuses, and to allow the dialogue that must eventually lead to a free Vietnam.

3. Background

General information

Vietnam is a country of 84 million people, bordering China to the north and Laos and Cambodia to the west. Most of the population lives on the coastal plain stretching the length of the country. Vietnam is a relatively densely populated country, with 254 people per sq km on average.

Particularly large centres of population are the capital, Hanoi, in the north of the country, with 3.3 million people; Saigon, the country's largest city and the south's economic hub, with 5 million; the port city of Danang in central Vietnam, with around 2.5 million; and Haiphong, the north's main seaport, with 1.6 million. The Red River delta, stretching from Hanoi to the South China Sea, and the Mekong delta in the far south are also major regions of population.

Of Vietnam's population, 84% is ethnic Vietnamese, 2% is ethnic Chinese, and the remainder are made up of Khmers, Chams and dozens of ethno-linguistic minorities especially prevalent in the highlands, thus known as 'Montagnards'.

Vietnam remains a predominantly agricultural country, despite the growth of the industrial and service sectors. Economic growth since the official abandonment of the centrally planned economy in 1986 has seen average per capita income rise to \$631⁴. Divisions between urban and rural areas are growing however: rural unemployment is upto 35% in non-harvest periods, leading to greater migration to, and unemployment in the cities. The Vietnamese fertility rate is 2.3 children per woman, its recent fall assisted by a literacy rate of 94%.

Inequality is made worse by corruption. This remains a deep-rooted problem in Vietnam, which despite repeated government promises to fight it remains unchanged: in 2005, Vietnam received a poor Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score of 2.6/10⁵. Vietnam is one of the ten worst countries in the world for press freedom, ranked 158/167 by Reporters Without Borders. Freedom House rates freedoms in Vietnam as being very low: 7/7 for political rights and 5/7 for civil liberties. Vietnam retains the death penalty for a range of offences, executing one person every six days in 2005, behind only China, Iran and Saudi Arabia⁶. Although the government has begun discussions of its abolition for economic crimes, it was announced on August 22nd that foreign currency trader Nguyen Thi Quynh Van of state-owned Incombank could face execution if found guilty of 'losing money on foreign currency trades'⁷.

The Communist Party of Vietnam holds total power. The Party's supreme organ of government is the seventeen-member Politburo, elected by the Central Committee, which is elected in turn by the National Congress. The leader of the Communist Party and Politburo and de facto national leader is General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, while the Prime Minister is Nguyen Tan Dung. The country's primarily ceremonial

⁴ The Economist, July 12th 2006

⁵ Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2005

⁶ Amnesty International, The Death Penalty, 2005

⁷ IPS, August 22nd 2006

president and head of the armed forces is Nguyen Minh Triet. The General Secretary began his first term in 2001; the President and Prime Minister were appointed after the Communist Party's 10th National Congress in April 2006.

As all three men now in control carry with them reputations as economic reformers, many people had high hopes that upon their appointment the new President and Prime Minister would begin political reforms towards a multi-party state. This has not happened. Indeed, as described below, there is evidence to suggest that since their appointment harassment of dissidents has in fact been stepped up. However it is the view of the author that following the ascent of those who have proved adept at what reforms they have undertaken, 2006 is an ideal opportunity to begin the much-needed process of political reform in Vietnam.

Vietnam: a very brief history

Vietnam is an ancient civilisation, whose history has been marked by conquest, rebellion, division and war. The first evidence of a proto-Viet civilisation dates from circa 200BC in the Red River delta. The first known western contact with this people was through explorers sent to China by Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who arrived in the Red River delta in 166AD. During this period, the emergent Vietnam was dominated by China, which maintained control despite successive rebellions until 938AD, when Vietnam rebelled and established itself as an autonomous tributary kingdom of China.

This state of affairs was maintained through the mid 1200s, when the Vietnamese repelled three heavy Mongol invasions, only to fall to China in 1407. This began a period of huge taxation, large-scale slavery and the heavier Sinocisation of Viet culture. This was a brief period however, as in 1428 the army of rebel leader Le Loi defeated the Chinese⁸. His general Nguyen Trai issued the 'Great Proclamation', which echoes through Vietnamese culture to this day:

Our people long ago established Vietnam as an independent nation with its own civilisation. We have our own customs and traditions... these are different from those of the foreign country to the north. We have sometimes been weak and sometimes powerful, but at no time have we suffered from a lack of heroes.

Vietnamese independence would last through several dynasties (including an early split between north and south in the 17th and 18th centuries) until 1859, when the hermitic Nguyen dynasty of Hue fell to France.

French rule, which lasted from 1859 to 1954, was characterised by the growth of infrastructure and novel political ideas, sporadic rebellion and serious abuse. Mines and plantations paid dire wages and subhuman treatment: of the 45,000 indentured workers employed between 1917 and 1944 at one Michelin rubber plantation, 12,000 died of disease and malnutrition⁹. On the arrival of the French, most people had owned their land; by the 1930s, 70% of Vietnamese were landless. In their attempts to keep control, French forces in Vietnam focussed much of their attention on suppressing political movements popular among the middle class. The Vietnam Quoc

⁸ Vietnam: A History, Stanley Karnow, 1997

⁹ Red Earth, Tu Binh, 1985

Dandang, a nationalist movement similar to the Kuomintang, saw its leadership guillotined in 1930. These factors, and a traditionally authoritarian political culture, led to the rise of communism in Vietnam.

A number of communist groups came together under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh in 1930 as the Communist Party of Vietnam, which as part of the Viet Minh fought the Japanese during WWII, a war in which Japanese rice requisitioning caused at least 2 million Vietnamese to starve to death. At Potsdam in 1945 it was resolved that the Kuomintang in the north and the British in the south would disarm Japanese troops. The French then returned, in the words of General Leclerc, 'to reclaim our inheritance'. In 1946, the French massacred hundreds of civilians after a customs dispute in Haiphong, and the war of independence began. After victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the North's new communist regime embarked on a collectivisation programme that killed up to 200,000 people. In 1959, it declared war on the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in the South, which was backed from the outset by the US.

This war was to last until 1975 and kill 10 percent of the civilian population. A failed copy of the 'strategic hamlets' programme (created and used successfully by Britain in Malaya) was followed by napalm bombing and the use of massive firepower against heavily populated areas by US forces. Atrocities mounted on both sides, as Vietnam became a bloody microcosm of the struggle against Communist expansion in the world. China and Russia, who supplied all the North's weaponry, did not suffer a single casualty.

The last American troops left the South in 1973. Anti-war groups then successfully lobbied the US Congress to reduce funding to Saigon, and the South's resistance to the Communist advance collapsed. Upon victory in 1975, the Communists launched successive anti-capitalist campaigns, vicious repression against those who spoke out for political or economic freedom, and especially harsh treatment against those who had fought for the South. Communism gradually crippled the economy of the entire country, and with an ideologically-driven population explosion, the 1980s saw Vietnam arrive at the brink of famine.

Since 1986, Doi Moi, or 'open door' reforms have allowed the Vietnamese to breathe new life into their economy, with real GDP growth around 7.5% between 2001 and 2005¹⁰, the government attempting to take the credit all the while. Now able to return to their mercantile culture and some economic freedom, and with the aid of telecommunications and the internet, the Vietnamese are beginning once again to push more strongly for political freedom. This will be the next chapter in the history of Vietnam.

¹⁰ The Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Report: Vietnam 2006

4. The current state of human rights in Vietnam

The government of Vietnam continues to deny the Vietnamese people their fundamental rights. These include: their right to free and fair elections; their right to free speech; their right to free expression through the media; their right to free association; their right to free worship; and their right to free movement. This state of affairs is in violation of the 1992 Constitution of Vietnam¹¹.

Chapter One, Article 4 describes the Communist Party's dictatorial role:

The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, the faithful representative of the rights and interests of the working class, the toiling people, and the whole nation, acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh's thought, is the force leading the State and society.

However, Article 4 then states that:

All Party organisations operate within the framework of the Constitution and the law.

In detailing these provisions of law, Chapter Five of the constitution states as follows:

Article 68:

The citizen shall enjoy freedom of movement and of residence within the country; he can freely travel abroad and return home from abroad in accordance with the provisions of the law.

Article 69:

The citizen shall enjoy freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press, the right to be informed, and the right to assemble, form associations and hold demonstrations in accordance with the provisions of the law.

Article 70:

The citizen shall enjoy freedom of belief and of religion; he can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law.
The places of worship of all faiths and religions are protected by the law.
No one can violate freedom of belief and of religion; nor can anyone misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law and State policies.

¹¹ The Constitution of Vietnam, 1992

Article 71:

The citizen shall enjoy inviolability of the person and the protection of the law with regard to his life, health, honour and dignity.

No one can be arrested in the absence of a ruling by the People's Court, a ruling or sanction of the People's Office of Supervision and Control except in case of flagrant offences. Taking a person into, or holding him in, custody must be done with full observance of the law.

It is strictly forbidden to use all forms of harassment and coercion, torture, violation of his honour and dignity, against a citizen.

Article 72:

No one shall be regarded as guilty and be subjected to punishment before the sentence of the Court has acquired full legal effect. Any person who has been arrested, held in custody, prosecuted, brought to trial in violation of the law shall be entitled to damages for any material harm suffered and his reputation shall be rehabilitated. Anybody who contravenes the law in arresting, holding in custody, prosecuting, bringing to trial another person thereby causing him damage shall be dealt with severely.

As this report illustrates, many of the Vietnamese government's human rights abuses are in direct contravention of its own constitution. It should also be noted that the abuses described in this report are merely a snapshot of the Vietnamese government's actions.

With a slight increase in attention on Vietnam in recent months due to the approaching APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Hanoi on November 16th and probable WTO membership, the government has taken some steps to deflect criticism of its record. A small number of political and religious prisoners have been released, and forced recantations of faith have been outlawed. In 2005, the government released with much publicity twelve prisoners of conscience; it then swiftly arrested many more, especially Christians from the Montagnard ethnic minorities and Buddhist leaders. Similarly, after the release of Pham Hong Son in August, activists visiting him were arrested and assaulted, including some of the people I interviewed. Such actions typify the Vietnamese government's tactics.

In 2005, the government published its 'white book', 'Achievements in Protecting and Promoting Human Rights in Vietnam', which appears to acknowledge the value of democracy. 'Vietnam's ultimate goal', the book says, 'is to build an equal, democratic and civilised society for the benefit of the people'. It states that the government 'has done its utmost to ensure the realisation of human rights through the building and constant improvement of the legal system and the undertaking of concrete measures aimed at promoting economic, social and cultural development so that every citizen can enjoy a better life both materially and spiritually in an equal, democratic and civilised society'. This statement, as the report will describe, is false. In fact, in the last two years, legal changes have seen Vietnam become more, not less, draconian. The white book adds: 'However, a number of hostile [people], for their own political

purposes, continue to use all means to make fabrications and false allegations against Vietnam, on issues related to human rights, democracy, religions and ethnicity'¹².

Despite the release of some dissidents, the general picture of human rights in the country remains unchanged. As described above, the authorities continue to deny the people of Vietnam *all their basic rights*. The government has intermittently experimented with mild criticism in the state press, and now allows some criticism within the system, although absolutely no suggestion that it should be fundamentally altered, such as with moves towards a multi-party state. The media remains tightly controlled, with little to no ability to provide a check on government power. The government allows no independent media.

The government monitors internet use, regularly arresting those who use it to criticise the regime, or even simply to download information about democracy. In July 2005 the government bolstered its repressive measures against internet use, issuing a directive banning internet use by 'reactionary or hostile forces'¹³. Internet café owners are required to prevent access to banned websites and report 'misuse', while the BBC Vietnamese language website has been intermittently blocked. As the author can attest, access to the BBC's website remains difficult outside the major cities. Many Vietnamese have been arrested for contravening the government's repressive codes, and those I met are detailed below. Others include Pham Hong Son, who on August 28th, 2006 was released from a five-year prison term for 'espionage', having emailed an article about democracy, and Nguyen Vu Binh, serving a seven-year prison term for writing one article critical of the government¹⁴.

Decree Number 56/2006/ND-CP recently came into force. This defines 2,200 violations of the law in the area of 'culture and information', and calls for fines of £1,100, a crippling amount for many Vietnamese, for violations such as circulating 'harmful' information.

There have been frequent highly credible reports of the use of torture¹⁵, including in the last month (see Conclusions and recommendations section below); arbitrary detention is commonplace; unfair trials are the norm. A number of NGOs have received reports of police officers beating, kicking, and using electric shock batons on detainees before and after trial, and allowing with full knowledge prison gangs to beat fellow prisoners with impunity. The author can personally attest to having seen criminal suspects being publicly and severely beaten outside police stations by the police. Police officers routinely arrest and detain suspects without any warrant. Legislation authorises arbitrary 'administrative detention' without trial for up to two years of anyone suspected of 'threatening national security', an offence of which those who speak out for democracy are frequently accused. Under Administrative Detention Decree 31/CP, individuals can be put under house arrest for alleged national security crimes for up to two years without being brought before a judge.

¹² Achievements in Protecting and Promoting Human Rights in Vietnam, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, August 19, 2005

¹³ Amnesty International, 2005

¹⁴ Vietnamese Federation for Fatherland's Integrity, 2006

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, Overview of Human Rights Issues in Vietnam, 2006

Political prisoners are subject to solitary confinement in small, damp, dark cells, often without any access to medical care. In some cases prisoners of conscience have been kept like this for many years. Political trials are entirely closed to the public, the foreign press and frequently even to relatives of the accused. Defendants do not have access to independent legal counsel.

Public protests or unlicensed public gatherings result in severe punishment. Decree Number 38/1005/ND-CP¹⁶ was recently enacted, which stiffens restrictions on freedom of assembly. This law bans public gatherings in front of government, party, or international conference locations, and requires organizers of public gatherings to obtain government permission in advance, which is impossible for any kind of protest.

Ethnic minorities and religious groups are subject to particularly harsh treatment, in a 'massive crackdown on two overlapping bodies',¹⁷ making Vietnam a US State Department 'country of particular concern' for religious repression. Vietnam's highland areas are home to most of the country's ethnic minorities, known collectively as the Montagnards. Major groups include the Tai, Hmong, Muong and the Nung. Many individuals from ethnic minority groups do not legally exist: without birth certificates or identity cards, they are particularly vulnerable to police brutality. A large proportion of the ethnic minority groups have a Christian majority; many are also accused of separatism by the government, despite the fact that outside observers know of no campaigns for independence in Vietnam, only for political, religious and cultural self-determination. It appears that accusations of separatism are fabricated by Hanoi in order to justify harsh central rule, and the last five years have seen two major protests by ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands, in 2001 and 2004. The 2004 protest saw 30,000 demand the return of ancestral lands. Ten people appear to have been killed during the protest by the police. There is highly credible evidence of a Montagnard Christian being tortured to death in a police cell in Dak Lak province on 14th July this year¹⁸.

In March 2005, the authorities renewed their efforts, launching a campaign in Dien Bien province in the Northwest to eradicate Protestantism amongst the Hmong¹⁹. Ethnic Hmong Christians in this region have been beaten, detained, and instructed by local authorities to renounce their religion and cease gathering to worship. Recent increased religious repression and increased numbers of troops in Lai Chau province caused a number of Hmong Christian families to flee to China, Burma and Laos. A number of ethnic minority Christians from the Central Highlands also fled to Cambodia. On return this year, they appear to have been beaten and tortured.

In the Central Highlands, the government has continued its persecution of Montagnards more generally this year, concentrating with particular intensity on those believed to follow 'Degar Christianity', a local Protestant movement banned by the Vietnamese government²⁰.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, Overview of Human Rights Issues in Vietnam, 2006

¹⁷ House International Relations Committee, US House of Representatives: Testimony of Paul Marshall, Senior Fellow of the Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House, October 6th, 2004.

¹⁸ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organisation: Montagnard Degar Christian dies from torture during interrogation about house-church activities, 8th August, 2006

¹⁹ Institute on Religion and Public Policy: Vietnam: A Report on the Religious Liberty Reality, 2005

²⁰ Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2006

Since 2001, around 300 Montagnard Christians have been imprisoned for being 'separatists', and on the common charge that they are 'undermining national unity'. Officials have also claimed that the Hmong 'Vang Chu' religion is a separatist front²¹. The author knows of no credible evidence to back up this claim.

Attacks on Christians and Buddhists are particularly severe among members of the ethnic minorities, but are also common among the ethnic Vietnamese majority. The government continues to insist that all religious ordinations are given prior approval by the state. In a number of cases, violation of this law alone has resulted in imprisonment for more than a decade (one of the activists the author met during the trip is a victim of this law). There have been a number of recent attacks on religious freedom. The Vietnam Mennonite Church remains unapproved and its members are subject to harassment. Within the last year, Mennonite general secretary Nguyen Hong Quang, released from prison in 2005, was violently attacked in his house-cum-chapel by a mob, severely damaging the property (he had recently been accused of a minor planning violation, which he had been preparing to answer)²². Other Christian groups are subject to attacks.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), which remains banned, saw monk Thich Thien Minh released from prison last year. The government confines to monasteries and constantly watches the group's First and Second Patriarchs, Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do²³. The Hoa Hao Buddhist sect has also seen its members attacked despite its officially sanctioned status. The police have attacked and desecrated Hoa Hao funerals and arrested members for making religious videotapes. Two followers self-immolated in August 2005 in protest against repression; their funerals, attended by thousands, were broken up with water cannons and tear gas and they have since been condemned by the regime for 'extremist acts of destroying themselves'. In the same month, Hoa Hao member Vo Van Thanh Liem was sentenced to seven years in jail for 'opposing the public authorities'²⁴. Nine followers of the Cao Dai religion, which has its centre in southern Vietnam's Tay Ninh province, were sentenced to up to thirteen years²⁵ after they tried to present a letter detailing government repression to diplomats at an ASEAN summit in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh.

Corruption remains a very serious problem and the cause of much public resentment of the regime. Vietnam's Corruption Perceptions Index score has remained stuck at a poor 2.6/10. One of corruption's worst effects is the trafficking of women and young girls for prostitution, forced prostitution and forced marriage, which is allowed to continue through the bribery of government officials. China and Cambodia are the main destinations for victims, with the provinces bordering these countries the worst affected²⁶.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, 2006

²² International Society for Human Rights [Germany], *Persecution of Christians in Vietnam Continues*, 2005

²³ US State Department, 2006

²⁴ Amnesty International, Report 2006, Socialist Republic of Vietnam

²⁵ House International Relations Committee, US House of Representatives: Testimony of Paul Marshall, Senior Fellow of the Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House, October 6th, 2004

²⁶ US State Department, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2006

In general, there is some evidence that as the government attempts to keep control against growing dissent, human rights abuses are worsening once again in some areas. As described below, a number of activists have come under constant surveillance and increased harassment within the last month. A number of those activists who met the author have seen their harassment by the security police stepped up, having been arrested upon my departure from the country.

5. Purposes of the visit

I visited Vietnam in order to meet and interview dissidents and to gather information on human rights and the treatment of dissidents by the government.

I discussed a number of issues with all the dissidents:

Firstly, I asked them about their actions and abuses of their human rights in particular. Some of those I met are young and have not been involved in the movement for democracy for long; however some have spent many years in jail, or the majority of their lives either in jail or under restricted movement.

Secondly, I asked them about their current actions and associations, as even those imprisoned for many years have not stopped their struggles for human rights.

Thirdly, I asked about how the government currently treats their actions in the struggle for democracy, such as ongoing human rights abuses against them.

I also talked with them more generally about the likely foreseeable future for Vietnam, possible political changes in the short and medium term, the government's approach to human rights with the approach of the autumn's APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Hanoi and the country's likely approaching membership of the World Trade Organisation, as well as what can be done to help Vietnam move towards multi-party democracy. Edited transcripts of my conversations with all the activists are presented below in as full a form as possible.

6. Itinerary and dissidents' biographical details

I spent the period between July 27th and August 5th in Vietnam, flying into Saigon and leaving from the capital Hanoi. The main purpose of the trip was to meet and gather information from three groups of dissidents, in Saigon on July 30th, in Hue, the old royal capital halfway up the coast between Saigon and Hanoi on August 1st, and in Hanoi on August 3rd.

All of those listed in this report know each other and are involved in the loose pro-democratic movement now known as Bloc 8406, although I also met other Vietnamese whom I know personally. These people are not publicly or officially affiliated with any part of the democracy movement and, although I gathered opinions

and news from them about issues relevant to this report, for their security I cannot give biographical details about them and they shall remain nameless.

I made the thousand-mile journey from Saigon to Hanoi by train, spending a short time in each city. The first meeting in Saigon was in my hotel room, as when I met the two Saigonesse dissidents they were being followed by members of the security police, who waited visibly on the street outside the hotel for the duration of our meeting. They then followed the two men when they left. In Hue, our meeting place was a common-house for Catholic priests, home to one of the two dissidents, which is also under constant surveillance by the security police. In Hanoi, a slightly larger meeting was held at the legal practice of one of the interviewees, who is both a dissident and a lawyer. Again the meeting itself went ahead unhindered by the authorities, although again it was understood that members of the security police were present on the street directly outside the office. Indeed, a few days after I left Vietnam, all those present in the last meeting were arrested by the security police, some interrogated for between ten hours and two days. Full details of this are given below in the 'Conclusions and recommendations' section of this report.

Biographical details of named interviewees

- In Saigon:

Nguyen Chinh Ket

Nguyen Chinh Ket is a former philosophy lecturer, forced out of his work at a Saigon convent college by the regime after expressing pro-democratic views. Since helping form Bloc 8406 in April 2006 he has been followed around the clock by the security police.

Do Nam Hai

Do Nam Hai is a former banker. During a period living in Australia, he wrote a number of articles on democracy, freedom and human rights in Vietnamese. He was arrested in 2004 after returning to Vietnam and forced out of work in 2005. He has been followed around the clock for the last year.

- In Hue:

Father Phan Van Loi

In 1981 Father Loi was secretly ordained as a priest and staged a short play about freedom. As a result he was imprisoned from 1981-1988. Since release he has been unable to leave Hue, and since 2001 has been under constant surveillance.

Father Nguyen Van Ly

Father Ly has spent a total of 15 years in jail and 20 years under restricted movement and constant surveillance for advocating political and religious freedom. Seven of his years in jail were in solitary confinement, for two he was shackled to a wall for twenty hours a day. He is unable to leave Hue.

- In Hanoi:

Nguyen Van Dai

Nguyen Van Dai is a lawyer who has been repeatedly arrested for articles critical of the regime. He is a co-author of the *2006 Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam*, which led to the founding of Bloc 8406. The security police have threatened his wife, family and staff and he is watched around the clock. He is summoned for interrogation twice a month.

Nguyen Khac Toan

Nguyen Khac Toan is a journalist who spent four years in jail for writing an article advocating democracy. He was released in January 2006. He is now confined to his ward of Hanoi and has been rearrested three times since release from prison, the last time shortly after I left Vietnam, when he was interrogated for two days. He is followed everywhere by police and his house monitored around the clock.

Bach Ngoc Duong

Bach Ngoc Duong is a 35 year-old engineer. He was first arrested for possessing writings critical of the regime and had property including his car stolen by police. He was last arrested and interrogated for two days after I left the country. Since then he has been placed under constant surveillance and is under threat of re-arrest.

Luong Duy Phuong

Luong Duy Phuong is a 26 year-old PR officer for an NGO. Since becoming a signatory of Bloc 8406 this year he has written pro-democratic articles, including detailing massive government funding of Communist Party activities through taxation. He has been interrogated by the police, prevented from going abroad and is under threat of re-arrest.

7. Full interview transcripts

First meeting, with Nguyen Chinh Ket and Do Nam Hai
in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), Sunday July 30th, 2006

Second meeting, with Father Nguyen Van Ly and Father Phan Van Loi
in Hue, Tuesday August 1st, 2006

Third meeting, with Nguyen Van Dai, Nguyen Khac Toan, Bach Ngoc Duong,
Nguyen Phuong Anh and Luong Duy Phuong
in Hanoi, Thursday, August 3rd, 2006

NB: it should be noted that the transcripts have been edited to exclude some details that could jeopardise the safety of interviewees and others.

Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City)

‘Since we have become more organised in our approach, the state’s harassment has become more serious. But the democracy movement is becoming stronger and stronger’

- Nguyen Chinh Ket
- Do Nam Hai

Nguyen Chinh Ket: ‘when I first began to speak my mind about the regime, this was to friends, and in the philosophy lessons I was then able to teach in a Saigon convent school. Two months after I began to speak my mind, I was arrested. I was accused of speaking for a foreign power, and I had my possessions, including my computer, seized. Under arrest, the police made me sign a printout of every file I had. Soon enough, I lost my job teaching philosophy at the convent school. However, I consider myself stronger after four years of harassment. I have grown used to the dangers’.

Do Nam Hai: ‘While living in Australia between 1994 and 2002, I wrote five articles on Vietnam’s history, democracy and liberty. In 2004, after I had returned home to Vietnam, the police discovered my writings, arrested me and began a period of routine interrogation. Their efforts have intensified since then, and in 2005 I lost my job. The security police are now stationed outside my house around the clock. While Nguyen Chinh Ket has been followed for the last six months, I have been followed everywhere by the security police for the last year. Since the two of us have become active in networking with other democratic dissidents in Hanoi, and become more organised in our approach, the state’s harassment has become more serious. But the democracy movement is becoming stronger and stronger. We feel that courage is breeding courage. Free Expression is not just the name of our new newspaper, but our most important right. We are simply realising that right in our lives’.

Nguyen Chinh Ket: ‘the number of activists remains few, so we have lots to do. Of course, the police try to make it very difficult for us to work together, but Free Expression is the first fruit of our network and collaboration. The police may know where it is printed, but they dare not interfere: those who print it have threatened a hunger strike if they do’.

‘In the past, the south was the focus of oppression, but now all of Vietnam dislikes communism, so oppression must by necessity be spread nationwide. With the new leadership, there is no political change coming. They still use the same orders, the same tools. In a way they are controlled by the nature of the party as much as vice-versa. As the economy improves, so too will politics, but politics is the root of the bad things in Vietnam. When China becomes a democracy, Vietnam will too: but before that - well, it's possible, but more difficult’.

Do Nam Hai: ‘Vietnamese politics depends very much on politics in China. Yet, on the other hand, Eastern Europe shook off communism and became democratic before the USSR’.

Nguyen Chinh Ket: ‘After democracy comes, the Vietnamese people will not want revenge on their former oppressors. This is very much not in their nature. The Vietnamese people want peaceful change. For this reason, we will not see revenge against them when this country is democratic: the dictators of today should not fear that’.

‘The regime is very good at dealing with the West and avoiding criticism: it imprisons its opponents on invented criminal charges to hide its oppression from the outside

world. I recommend people support EU Resolution 14a1 (2006): this accuses the regime of abuses of human rights. The British people should support this resolution and raise their voices to show the deceit of Vietnamese government. The appearance of Vietnamese politics is OK: the reality, the oppressive, corrupt core, is very bad’.

Hue

‘I was in solitary from 2001 until my release. My cell was four paces by four paces. I paced for 16 hours a day. I had no books, no magazines, and no paper on which to write’

- Father Nguyen Van Ly
- Father Phan Van Loi

Father Nguyen Van Ly: ‘The regime want to destroy us but they do not dare. I have been under ‘district arrest’ for 5 years: although I have been able to violate this, I cannot leave Hue. I am confined to this city’.

Father Phan Van Loi: ‘I have been in the same situation since 2001: I have to live in my family home. I am barred from working as a priest, as all religious staff must be recognised by the government’.

Father Nguyen Van Ly: ‘Officially, I am not allowed to leave my district in Hue, but in reality the local authorities do not enforce this strongly. However the reality is that I cannot leave the city, and Hue is not a big place’.

‘Since 1975, I have been in jail three times, for 15 years in total. For 20 years on top of that I have been under a regime of restricted movement. The last stretch in jail was from 2001 to 2005, for 4 years of a 15-year sentence. I was held in Nam Ha prison camp, Ha Nam province’.

‘Each time, the government said we were ‘destroying national unity’, and were ‘reactionaries’, but both of us have simply been asking for religious and political freedom in Vietnam, as we have been ever since 1975. We were both born in Hue, and we went to the same seminary’.

Father Phan Van Loi: ‘I was in jail from 1981-1988: I was imprisoned in 3 prison camps; you must understand that the worst places in the world today are communist prison camps. These are very inhuman places. We were treated like animals in these places. I was imprisoned in Thua Phu prison camp in Thua Thien Hue province [the province of the city of Hue]; in Dong Son prison camp, in Quang Binh province; and in Binh Dien prison camp, also in Thua Thien Hue province. I had to live alongside criminals in these camps, do 8 hours labour per day; I had a food ration of 15 kilos of rice per month, including some maize and a few Vietnamese potatoes. I was allowed one family visit every two months. Worst of all, in all that time I was only allowed to read the regime's books, absolutely nothing else. I had no telephone and I could write one letter per month, which was then censored. This was all because I had been

secretly ordained in 1981. I recently celebrated 25 years of priesthood! However my secret ordination is one reason for my continued illegality now’.

‘After ordination, I helped to put on a small play. The government said the play was propaganda against the regime - but there were just five people, one priest and four seminarists, in the play! I received a 4-year sentence at that point: four years, for a five-minute play! After four years, the authorities discovered I was a priest- so I got another three years. I have now been kept in Hue from 1988-2006: I have not been able to leave this small city once since 2001’.

Father Nguyen Van Ly: ‘I became a priest in 1974, and I started working in Saigon. Then in 1975 I returned to Hue, my hometown, as Secretary to the Archbishop of Hue. The Archbishop is now a martyr: he was poisoned by the regime in hospital in Saigon in 1988. I was arrested in 1977, but then released after 4 months despite a 20-year sentence having been imposed on me. The next time I was arrested was in 1983- this time I received a 10-year sentence, of which I served 9 yrs and 6 months. The last time was the full time of a four-year sentence’.

‘It was a different situation each time. It was just four months the first time, then I spent 1983 to 1986 in a solitary confinement cell. Then I was imprisoned in solitary from 2001 until my release. My cell was four paces by four paces. I paced for 16 hours a day. I had no books, no magazines, and no paper on which to write. I had only holy songs and prayers to keep me going. I would pray all day and all night [shows me: pacing and praying]. I did this morning until night for 3 years. For two years of this one ankle was shackled for twenty hours a day, and this shackle was released from 10am to 2pm. I could speak to other political prisoners through the walls- but apart from the actual criminals in there, some were spies too. However, some of the prisoners ended up learning my prayers by heart. Now we could easily be imprisoned again for a number of reasons: because we still do not obey’.

Hanoi

‘The security agency sends 6 to 8 people every day to spy on me and watch everything I do and everywhere I go’

‘Le Hong Ha, the former Chief of Cabinet of the Interior Ministry, was expelled for calling for reform, and he is now a dissident. He has told us how the police get instruction on how to torture’

‘Even in the Communist Party they want to work with the West more than with China. The West just needs to apply pressure’

- Nguyen Khach Toan
- Nguyen Van Dai
- Bach Ngoc Duong
- Nguyen Phuong Anh
- Luong Duy Phuong

Bach Ngoc Duong: 'In September 2005 I wrote some internet articles about democracy, and as a result I was soon arrested and interrogated continuously for two days by the security police. Then they released me, but since then they have watched me continuously. My employers have been pressured to fire me, and my family have been harassed. Then, a second time, after I met with dissidents and reporters, the police brought me in for questioning. More recently I have been stopped from leaving the country because of a security police order. I cannot leave Vietnam to talk to anyone or for any reason. This is a very common situation'.

Nguyen Phuong Anh: 'I was running my business. I had some articles on human rights and democracy, and I made a trip to visit democratic dissidents in northern Vietnam: soon, the police arrived and took my property, and the company car I was driving, but as is normal, they gave no reason- Vietnam's agencies of state don't even pretend to follow the rule of law. Before this the security police came to threaten my family. So far, they have been called to order me to go to the security police office 25 times'.

Luong Duy Phuong: 'I have been involved in the democracy movement for a little while. In April I was arrested and I have been followed continuously since then. Not long ago I was told I would be 'at risk' if I tried to leave Vietnam. Last night I tried to board a plane to Bangkok to travel to a conference. I was stopped and kept for two hours in a security room at Hanoi airport. I was not allowed to leave the country, and I am now informed I am being kept in Vietnam by order of the Ministry of Public Security. My name is on a special list- even though I am just a 26 year-old saying what I know to be right. Please speak up for our freedom. We very much need outside help'.

Nguyen Van Dai: 'I have been working for human rights for 6 years. I was arrested in Hoang Minh Chinh's house [an 86 year old activist and former high ranking Communist Party official jailed for 23 years] this year after writing our 2006 Manifesto. I have to meet a security officer twice a month. Security officers watch me everywhere. My wife and family are threatened. My phone is cut off constantly, all my utilities are cut off too'.

Bach Ngoc Duong: 'The Vietnamese regime pretends to the west to respect human rights- but this not real. As regards Vietnam joining the WTO, they do not respect human rights, and they do not even really respect freedom of trade in this country because of the corruption and cronyism of the Vietnamese economy.'

Luong Duy Phuong: 'The regime keeps the gates of the country shut so we cannot leave and tell our story. We are trapped. We are not free'.

Nguyen Van Dai: 'The regime, like any dictatorship, tries to control the truth. So when we tell people abroad what happens here, there's always more trouble for us. You are right in saying the government hates people talking to foreigners about its abuses. It reminds the regime that it cannot control the truth as it wishes, it cannot control reality'.

Nguyen Khac Toan: 'I was freed from prison on January 24th this year, having been in a prison camp for 4 years. Of course, since my release I have kept speaking up. In all my articles I promote strong political freedom and real reform. This means moving from a mono-party to a multi-party system. And this will take time. But now we need our basic human rights: freedom of opinion, speech, press, religion, travel and association. As for me, the security agency sends 6 to 8 people every day to spy on me and watch everything I do and everywhere I go. These men stay all day and all night outside my house: they watch every approach to my house all night and all day; they monitor everyone who goes in or out; they have disconnected all my means of communication and they have cut my mobile phone connection six times since January. Internet connection is impossible and all my mobile phone conversations, when I can connect, are recorded. But I'm not afraid because I have rights as a human. Expression, information, my own opinions. In fact these rights are in our constitution, and the government signed the International Convention on Human Rights and ratified it'.

'I am not even allowed to leave my ward and go to the rest of the district. This is in effect like a house arrest, but the Vietnamese regime is much smarter than to do to me or anyone else what the Burmese regime does to Aung San Suu Kyi and get all that bad publicity. However, this office is outside my ward, and so I am breaking the rules imposed on me by meeting you here. This is the third time I have broken my ward arrest since its imposition after my release from jail, so now I am likely to be punished for meeting you. In the past they would send 10 policemen to stop me. They try all sorts of ways now'.

'Since my release from prison I was arrested on my way to an internet cafe on 27th February, then on 7th April on the way to Hoang Minh Chinh's house: the third time may well be after today, because of talking to you. I will now be punished because that is what happens after 3 times. There may be a fine, there may be a trial. I may then be imprisoned for 6 months to 3 years'.

Nguyen Van Dai: 'This happened to him before so it could easily happen again after today'.

Nguyen Khac Toan: 'I tend to have meetings in my house or ward, but it was my choice to meet here. I am not afraid. I will keep you informed'.

Luong Duy Phuong: 'Everyone here wants civil society and multi party democracy. We really need outside support for democracy to achieve this. Also, people need books, articles, and so on to help the public in general learn how to create a just and democratic society. Dissidents remain weak. People need more support and training, and we need more help from overseas'.

Nguyen Van Dai: 'Before 2004 the police arrested anyone who raised their voice for freedom. But recently there have been some releases for the government's foreign public relations purposes. Writing one single article would put people in jail back then and the government might get like this again. But now dissident activity has grown stronger and more dynamic. In the past a meeting like this would get us all arrested.'

‘The key event came at the 10th National Congress of the Communist Party in April this year. The leadership said they wanted ‘opinion contributions’ for the congress. Since then more opinions have been raised - people have become more confident. Many types of people are now raising their voices. These people can be divided into three types: the first type are party members: but they just ask for reform within the one party system to make it more democratic. The second type are non-members from all parts of country and all professions who ask for real political reform and the erasing of Article 4 from the Constitution of Vietnam: this says there may be only one party, the Communist Party. The third type are the dissidents. These are the people that call for the broadest changes and do so persistently. Recently there have been big scandals like PMU18 [the embezzlement of millions of dollars in the government’s Public Management Unit 18] and many others, and this is beginning to help our ranks to grow. So there are two movements in Vietnam: one is for democracy and the other is against corruption. People are starting to see the complementary nature of these two movements, and work is now happening in tandem’.

Nguyen Khac Toan: ‘On the issue of how the Vietnamese people see their place in the political sphere, people do not yet feel that politics is theirs to control. They have plenty of opinions, but do not feel it is their right to demand they are attended to. They feel the political world belongs to someone else. In Thailand we can see that people raise their voices against corruption. In Vietnam they also feel bad about it, indeed very angry about it, but many do not see that it is their right to make demands for change. They are also very afraid of the police and cannot protest in public- the penalties for this are very severe. If you do this the state will try to ruin your life’.

Nguyen Van Dai: ‘Everyone knows that the Communist Party has lost direction due to corruption scandals: now they are using anti-corruption slogans to try to get back on course. But the PMU18 scandal is increasing pro-democratic sentiment. This is mainly happening in the cities, especially Hanoi, Saigon, Hue and Danang’.

Nguyen Khac Toan: ‘We are in a similar situation to other dictatorships, such as China and Cuba. Things start with the educated people. They can find things out, they have the confidence to ask questions about injustice. But the movement is spreading. In Thai Binh province, Mr Tran Anh Kim is the representative of the movement, and he represents 500 farmers there. In fact, three leading figures in the movement are originally from high levels in the Communist Party. They have been in prison and have been tortured. Tran Anh Kim was an officer in the army. He was in the Communist Party for 27 years. Some other high officials in the regime are leaving, as different people raise their voices. The internet helps a great deal. Tran Anh Kim raised his voice against corruption in the army, so he was sent to military prison for two years. Peasant farmers in Thai Binh province are being massively overtaxed by the local government, which was and is corrupt. Now he is out and leading these people’.

Nguyen Van Dai: ‘The Party now accepts some different opinions, in the sense that very light criticism from state media and from inside the party is seen as tolerable. This makes things look freer, but with the other hand, the regime is getting tougher on dissidents and anyone with a truly different opinion. The BBC website is very popular, but doesn’t give Vietnamese people much detail. Please could you suggest to them that they put more information on democracy, dissidents and so on? This kind of

information has a very big effect, as the BBC is very respected. The government uses the state media to slander dissidents, which is especially effective among the old. It is difficult for democrats to live in communities that suspect them because they are brainwashed by the state’.

Nguyen Khac Toan: ‘The government is similarly oppressive in the north and south. For those dissidents who are well-known faces (like some of us and those others you have met), the very top of the regime checks up on us. The Vietnamese leadership likes to be kept updated on our actions and locations’.

‘The Ministry of Public Security classifies people for their own purposes. Some are treated politely and gently, some are terrorised. Some of us in this room are terrorised. Dissident leaders, such as Hoang Minh Chinh and myself are treated like this unceasingly. Up until now the movement has had little money and is not sufficiently established to have an official leadership, so the government has not known who to attack most. This may have been an advantage for us, but this also seems to be changing. However, one leader might face the same things as Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, where the NLD is having big difficulties. We have tried to keep things looser here. The movement is still new and an official leader would seem wrong at this point. Things need to grow first. We don’t want conflict in the democracy movement and we need a critical mass. Bloc 8406 now has a representative in every province, but to have an official opposition party is not useful or possible yet. More steps are needed before that’.

Nguyen Van Dai: ‘A few days ago we met Le Hong Ha, the former Chief of Cabinet of the Interior Ministry. He was expelled for calling for reform, and he is now a dissident and helps the democracy movement. He has given us information on the police, including detailing that they get instruction on how to torture. Since the start of 2006 things have been developing fast. We hope realistically for democracy in five years, because the government is finding it has to lessen its control, the democracy movement is growing, there is increasing ex-pat Viet support, and increasing international community support’.

‘Beijing considers Vietnam to be a buffer state and may try hard to control things in Hanoi. However Vietnam wants to work with the West more than with China. We have learned our lessons from Chinese behaviour in the past. We hope to be independent from them soon! The Vietnamese people will ultimately decide, and 90% of them do not like Beijing. Even in the Communist Party they want to work with the West more than with China. The West just needs to apply pressure’.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

Events surrounding the visit

The Vietnamese government claims that it respects the human rights of its people. This claim is fraudulent. The government is currently enjoying warming foreign relations, and although it has done a great deal to try to convince outside parties, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union and the World Trade

Organisation of its case, occurrences surrounding my visit provide an illustrative case in point.

At no point during my visit was I personally harassed by the security police or anyone else. Police agents were waiting outside to continue following the dissidents with whom I met, which meant our conversations had to take place in private locations such as my hotel room. However this did not directly affect our conversation, nor were these dissidents directly harassed over and above their usual treatment during the time I was in Vietnam.

However, following my departure from Vietnam a number of disturbing incidents took place. It should be stressed however that there is no evidence that this was directly connected to my visit.

I have described how security police were in the vicinity of all the meetings, including waiting just outside Nguyen Van Dai's legal practice in Hanoi. A few days after I left Vietnam, the following occurred:

On August 12th and 13th, police arrested Nguyen Van Dai, Nguyen Khac Toan, Bach Ngoc Duong, Luong Duy Phuong and Miss Duong Thi Xuan, another activist, having entered their homes without search warrants. The reason given to them by the police was some individuals' preparation of the internal bulletin 'Tu Do Dan Chu', or 'Freedom and Democracy', which they had been preparing for some time.

Nguyen Van Dai was held and interrogated for ten hours and his home phone line and two office lines were disconnected. This was felt by his associates to be collective punishment, 'in order to place unbearable strain on his relationships with his wife and with his staff: they want to send a message that because of his activities, they will suffer the consequences'.

Nguyen Khac Toan was held and interrogated for two days. The police also broke into his house and took a large number of his possessions, including his work materials, computer, laptop and his two mobile phones.

Bach Ngoc Duong was also held and interrogated for two days. Police then visited his house, 'to stir up his things and take his computer'. According to recent emails he has sent, Bach Ngoc Duong is now under surveillance by the security police everywhere he goes for 24 hours a day, and the security police have made it clear to him that he is under threat of re-arrest. He has recently been forced out of his most recent lodging and currently has homeless status.

Miss Duong Thi Xuan and Mr Hoang Tien, a co-writer of 'Freedom and Democracy', were also arrested in Hanoi. The police took Hoang Tien's computer and documents.

On September 2nd, around ten security police began following Luong Duy Phuong at a distance of ten metres. At the gate of his house he was bitten by one of the police officers. He was then taken to the police station where he refused to talk. The police then threatened his landlady and he fears he may soon be made homeless.

All those arrested in Hanoi have been made to work at police stations for an as yet unconfirmed period of time. At the time of writing, the author was also receiving news about the harassment in early August of four young activists in Saigon, all associated with the individuals in Hanoi and with others of the current 1,872 peaceful democracy activists in Bloc 8406. This appears to constitute a new, quiet wave of repression. Activist Pham Than Long has been taken into custody by police and forced to sign as yet unknown documentation; Nguyen Ngoc Quang has been taken into custody by police, ten officers arresting him as he went to pay respects at his father's grave; Do Thanh Cong, Nguyen Hoang Long and Huynh Viet Lang, all members of the banned People's Democratic Party, have been arrested; Vu Hoang Hai was arrested in Saigon, and I have received reports of his torture on August 4th, with punches to the face and back during interrogation.

These incidents amply illustrate the treatment given to those who speak out for human rights in Vietnam, whether they speak their minds to fellow Vietnamese or to foreigners.

Recommendations

To the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Contrary to the claims of the Vietnamese police and judiciary, there is no evidence to suggest that any known member of the movement for democracy in Vietnam constitutes any threat whatsoever to national security. Claims in this or similar directions by the state must therefore be taken as deceit.

The Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam should take immediate steps to:

- Release all prisoners of conscience
- Release from the threat of imprisonment or re-imprisonment all those who call for democracy in Vietnam
- End the regimes of restricted movement imposed on dissidents, be they 'city arrests', 'district arrests' or 'ward arrests'
- Stop all forms of police harassment of those who call for democracy
- Recognise that the government cannot prevent forever, but only needlessly delay, the advent of freedom of speech, thought, politics, association and the press in Vietnam
- In so doing, commit to a timetable for free and fair multi-party elections in Vietnam.

To 'Bloc 8406' and pro-democracy activists in general in Vietnam

The Conservative Party Human Rights Commission fully supports the aims of the pro-democracy movement 'Bloc 8406', and all those in Vietnam who struggle peacefully for freedom, human rights and democracy.

There appears to the Commission to be no evidence whatsoever for any claims by the Vietnamese government that any dissident is acting as a proxy for outside forces or states. Indeed, the sovereignty of Vietnam can only be assured when the people are free to elect their own leaders in free and fair multi-party elections.

The enormous majority of the Vietnamese people want democracy. The government of Vietnam has acknowledged the existence of human rights, the need to respect them, and the standards to which it should adhere.

That the government of Vietnam continues to deny the people their rights as human beings is an affront to the dignity of every Vietnamese. This must end, and with the continued courage of all those who stand up for their rights, and the rights of their fellow Vietnamese, it will.

To the BBC

Among the dissidents and other individuals I spoke to in Vietnam there was general agreement that the BBC has a particular role to play in disseminating information to the Vietnamese people about their rights and abuses thereof, and applying pressure to the Vietnamese government to respect human rights and move towards democracy.

The BBC is a highly respected broadcaster in Vietnam, and in an environment in which the entire Vietnamese media is state-controlled (with the exception of underground publications such as Free Expression), the Vietnamese generally see the BBC as being one of the best sources of reliable information about their country.

Over the last two years however, the government of Vietnam has attempted to block access to the BBC, particularly the Vietnamese language section of the BBC's news website, and succeeded in blocking this completely for a short period over the last year. Access in smaller towns and rural areas, where the government is more able to block the website, remains intermittent and subject to frequent interruption, although in urban areas access is relatively easy. On the airwaves, Vietnamese language broadcasts are a very useful and easily accessed source of information for very large number of Vietnamese.

As these actions have increased the prestige of the BBC, especially in urban areas and among educated people, many now feel that the BBC is well placed to give more information about the democracy movement, the government's human rights abuses and dissidents themselves. Sadly, a number of people informed me in the course of gathering information for this report that they feel the BBC's coverage of Vietnam has slipped in the opposite direction, with less information and a less direct approach becoming the norm, especially in relation to the growth in the democracy movement's activities and organisation over the past year. Many feel that this is being done to appease the Vietnamese government and to be allowed to continue to broadcast unhindered. I must stress however that this is the opinion of some of those I met, and cannot be verified by the author.

Given that interest in the BBC has grown as a result of government interference, and that calls for democratic change are growing in Vietnam, it appears that a useful juncture has been reached in terms of the dissemination of the truth. The BBC is well

placed to increase the amount of information it broadcasts: specifically, on the human rights abuses committed by the Vietnamese government and its agencies of state, on the underground pro-democratic media in Vietnam, on the pro-democracy movement around the country and on individuals involved in this movement, especially in order to counter some of the slanderous comments made about them in the state press.

Although in the short term this may increase the government's efforts to block the BBC in Vietnam, experience has shown that the government does not sustain these efforts for long before bowing to pressure from within and without to allow the BBC to broadcast (indeed, it is understood that the BBC is the preferred source of news for many members of the regime, as it was in the USSR in the 1980s). As the Vietnamese people increasingly crave reliable information about their country, and as each attempt by the government to block coverage now appears to increase the BBC's prestige in Vietnam, it strongly appears that it would be in the long term interest of both the BBC and Vietnam to broadcast more information, more directly, about freedom, democracy and human rights in Vietnam. This would be warmly welcomed by those who struggle for freedom in the country and by the Vietnamese in general.

To the Government of the United Kingdom and all other international actors

The Vietnamese government's respect for human rights is a charade. The British government and all other international actors should:

1. Urge the government of Vietnam to release all prisoners of conscience
2. Urge the government of Vietnam to cease all its forms of harassment against those who advocate democracy in Vietnam, many of which are illegal according to the 1992 constitution.
3. Given that the government of Vietnam has tacitly acknowledged the importance of human rights in its communications, public relations exercises and 1992 constitution, encourage the government to commit to a timetable for the process of genuine political reform so that human rights may be respected in action as well as word.

Vietnam stands at the advent of a new chapter in its remarkable history. The vast majority of the Vietnamese people want a multi-party democracy that respects their rights as human beings. All those concerned for their welfare, and for human rights in general, should not allow the Vietnamese government's deceit to continue. The process of transition to democracy should begin now.

Rado Tylecote
Conservative Party Human Rights Commission
September 2006