

VIET NAM

SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM

Head of state: Tran Duc Luong

Head of government: Phan Van Khai

Capital: Ha Noi

Population: 75.1 million

Official language: Vietnamese

Death penalty: retentionist

2000 treaty ratifications/signatures: Optional Protocol to the UN Children's Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict

Dozens of prisoners of conscience and possible prisoners of conscience remained in prison throughout 2000, and restrictions on released prisoners continued to be harsh. Political dissidents and religious critics of the government were subjected to surveillance, harassment and denial of basic freedoms, including freedom of expression. At least five possible prisoners of conscience were sentenced to prison terms. The government continued to prevent independent human rights monitors from visiting the country. More than 110 people were sentenced to death and at least 12 executions were carried out.

Background

A reported total of 22,597 prisoners were released under a special amnesty to mark two important anniversaries, and thousands of others had sentences reduced. No information was made public about whether political prisoners were included. Only two prisoners of conscience were known to have been released in the April amnesty commemorating the 25th anniversary of South Liberation Day. A self criticism campaign launched by the Communist Party in 1999 continued throughout the year, as did campaigns against official corruption and crime. A revised Criminal Code came into effect in July. In the latter part of the year the country suffered the worst flooding in decades, resulting in the deaths of more than 500 people. In November President Bill Clinton became the first US president to visit the country since the Viet Nam war.

Death penalty

Twenty-nine offences ranging from national security to economic crimes remained punishable by death. One hundred and twelve death sentences and 12 executions were recorded. However, the true figures were believed to be much higher; the authorities did not make public full information on the death penalty. Most of the reported death sentences were imposed for drug trafficking. Seven death sentences were recorded for economic offences such as fraud and forgery. Executions are carried out by firing squad, sometimes in public. It was common for relatives not to be informed of executions beforehand, but to be asked to collect belongings a few days after execution.

In July changes to the Code of Criminal Procedure came into

effect which allowed death sentences on pregnant women or breast-feeding mothers of children aged up to 36 months to be changed to life imprisonment.

☞ Nguyen Thi Hiep, a 42-year-old Canadian national of Vietnamese origin, was executed in April. She had been sentenced to death in April 1997 on charges of drug trafficking. Her 73-year-old mother, arrested with her in 1996, was sentenced to life imprisonment. The Canadian authorities called for a review of the sentence to take into account evidence gathered by Canadian police authorities that both women had been unwittingly used as couriers by a major drugs ring. Despite indications that the Vietnamese authorities would review the evidence, Nguyen Thi Hiep was executed without any advance notice. Her mother was subsequently granted an amnesty.

Prisoners of conscience

Dozens of prisoners of conscience and possible prisoners of conscience continued to be detained for their political beliefs and religious affiliations. Many were elderly and in poor health.

☞ Sixty-eight-year-old Professor Nguyen Dinh Huy, the founder and president of the "Movement to Unite the People and Build Democracy", continued to be held in prison camp Z30A, in Dong Nai province, for his peaceful political activities. He had been arrested in November 1993 and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in August 1995 after trying to organize a conference about human rights and democracy in Ho Chi Minh City. He had previously spent 17 years in detention without charge or trial.

☞ Reverend Pham Ngoc Lien (Tri), a 59-year-old Roman Catholic monk, was one of three members of the banned Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix who remained in detention. He was arrested in May 1987 and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment in connection with his religious activities. He was reportedly in poor health.

Trials

At least five possible prisoners of conscience were tried and sentenced for activities relating to the practice of their religion. Trials routinely fell short of international standards.

☞ In September, five members of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church were sentenced to between one and three years' imprisonment for "using religion to abuse democratic rights and freedoms". Truong Van Thuc, Nguyen Chau Lang, Tran Van Be Cao, Tran Nguyen Huon and Le Van Nhuom were arrested in March in An Giang province after reportedly complaining to the central authorities about abuses by local authorities.

Harassment of government critics

Political and religious dissidents, including former prisoners of conscience, continued to face harassment and restrictions on their peaceful activities by the authorities.

☞ Thich Quang Do, a 73-year-old former prisoner of conscience and Secretary General of the unofficial Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam (UBCV), remained under surveillance at his monastery in Ho Chi Minh City with harsh restrictions on his activities and movements. In October he

and several other UBCV members attempted to deliver relief to victims of the severe floods in the Mekong Delta. They were stopped by the authorities on arrival in An Giang province and prevented from carrying out the relief distribution, which the authorities stated should only be done through official channels. However, a second attempt to carry out an aid mission in November was allowed to go ahead. In 1995 Thich Quang Do had been sentenced to five years' imprisonment after protesting about the arrest of UBCV members who attempted to carry out a similar relief mission to flood victims in 1994. He had been released under an amnesty in 1998.

Denial of access

AI continued to receive no response from the government to correspondence about human rights violations. Domestic human rights monitoring was not permitted and no access was given to independent human rights monitors.

AI country report

- Socialist Republic of Viet Nam: The death penalty – recent developments (AI Index: ASA 41/001/2000)