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Vietnam: Conviction of three human rights defenders upheld

Bangkok-Paris-Geneva, December 12, 2014: The conviction of three human rights defenders on trumped-up charges is the latest act of the government's relentless repression of independent voices, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (a joint program of FIDH and OMCT) and the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) said today.

Today, the Dong Thap Appellate Court upheld on appeal the conviction and jail terms of Ms. **Bui Thi Minh Hang**, Mr. **Nguyen Van Minh**, and Ms. **Nguyen Thi Thuy Quynh** on charges of "causing public disorder" under Article 245, paragraph 2, of the Criminal Code. On August 26, the Dong Thap Provincial People's Court had sentenced Bui Thi Minh Hang, Nguyen Van Minh, and Nguyen Thi Thuy Quynh to prison terms of three years, two years and six months, and two years respectively. The three remain detained in Dong Thap Province.

"The conviction of Bui Thi Minh Hang, Nguyen Van Minh, and Nguyen Thi Thuy Quynh is a stark reminder of the absence of an independent judiciary in Vietnam," said FIDH President Karim Lahidji. *"The three must be immediately released and provided adequate compensation for their unjust imprisonment."*

Police arrested Bui Thi Minh Hang, Nguyen Van Minh, and Nguyen Thi Thuy Quynh on February 11, 2014, in Lap Vo District, Dong Thap Province, as the three were travelling from Ho Chi Minh City to Dong Thap Province to visit former prisoner of conscience **Nguyen Bac Truyen** and his wife. Two days earlier, police had raided the couple's home and taken Truyen into custody.

Bui Thi Minh Hang, Nguyen Thi Thuy Quynh, and Nguyen Van Minh are well known for their peaceful campaigns for religious freedom, the release of political prisoners, and their support to victims of land confiscation.

"The ongoing harassment, arbitrary detention, and imprisonment of human rights defenders illustrate Vietnam's failure to live up to its repeated pledges to protect human rights," said OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock. *"At the end of its first year as a UN Human Rights Council member, Vietnam's rights record remains abysmal and its authoritarian tendencies are increasing."*

Over the past few weeks, Vietnamese authorities have intensified the crackdown on freedom of expression with the arrest of two prominent bloggers. On 29 November, police in Ho Chi Minh City detained blogger Hong Le Tho, 65, under Article 258 of the Criminal Code for "abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State." Authorities accused Hong Le Tho of posting articles "with bad content and false information that discredit and create distrust among people about state agencies" on his Nguoi Lot Gach ['Brick layer'] blog. On 6 December, police in Ho Chi Minh City detained blogger Nguyen Quang Lap, 58, under Article 258 of the Criminal Code for posting online articles that criticized the Vietnamese Communist Party and the government on his blog Que Choa ['Dad's Homeland'].

Since January 2014, Vietnam has detained or imprisoned at least 11 bloggers and human rights defenders and it currently holds about 200 political prisoners, the largest number in Southeast Asia.

"Today's verdict is a harsh reality check for those in the international community who are seeking to improve economic and military ties with Hanoi with the expectation that the Vietnamese government would embark upon reforms to show it respects the people's fundamental rights," said VCHR President Vo Van Ai. *"More international pressure on Hanoi is needed to ensure that arbitrary arrests and imprisonments stop and that all political prisoners, including human rights defenders, are released,"* he urged.

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