

## **Vietnam Continued to Persecute Catholics in Nghe An Province in 2017**

Respectfully submitted to:

- UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Beliefs
- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights – Geneva Office  
8-14 Avenue de la Paix  
CH-1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland

### **(1).General Information**

**Summary:** Public security (police) in the Vietnamese province of Nghe An continued to persecute Catholics in Quynh Luu District, this time in Song Ngoc Parish.

- Did the incidents involve an individual or a group?

*A group, Catholics in Song Ngoc Parish*

- If a group, number of persons and religious affiliation of each person?

*This violation affected over 2400 adherents.*

Location of incidents:

*Song Ngoc Parish in Huynh Ngoc Commune, Quynh Luu District, Nghe An, Vietnam..*

- Nationality and ethnic group of victims: *Kinh ethnic group, Vietnamese citizenship.*

- Does national policy require registration for religious activities? If yes, what is the current status of the group?

*The government of Vietnam requires all religious organizations to register. However, even a number of registered groups, including Catholic parishes, face persecution and harassment.*

### **(2) Information on victims**

Provide information below for each individual.

Family name: Nguyen      Given name: Dinh Thuc (Catholic priest)

Address: Song Ngoc Parish in Huynh Ngoc Commune, Quynh Luu District, Nghe An.

Birth date: April 10, 1978      Gender: male

### ***(Attachment\_1 List of victims at the protest Feb14\_2017)***

### **(3) Information on the alleged violation(s)**

- Date and time (approximate if not known exactly):

*Feb 14, 2017 through Oct 29, 2017*

#### A.Song Ngoc Parish Overview:

*The parish has 2640 Catholics, is part of Vinh Diocese, and consists of 4 parish subdivisions: Vân Trường, Văn Thai, and 2 others. Residents are almost exclusively fishermen or workers in related work. All saw their livelihood wiped out after the Ha Tinh Formosa Steel Plant released hazardous waste into the sea, contaminating the coastal waters and causing a massive fish kill. Formosa acknowledged its responsibility and has sent Vietnam \$500 million USD to compensate those affected in the provinces of Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Bình and Thừa Thiên.*

*Seeing no compensation from the government to help the impoverished residents, Parish priest Nguyễn Đình Thục led protests against Formosa and an effort to submit a formal complaint to a court to seek compensation.*

*From the time Song Ngoc parishioners began their quest for compensation and justice, the local government has been conducting a campaign to smear their priests and suppress the parishioners' quest for justice, using various means including brutal suppression and desecrating religious icons.*

**B. Incident of Feb 14, 2017:**

*On February 14, 2017, more than 600 victims from 3 communes in Nghe An Province, i.e., Quynh Ngoc, Son Hai, and Quynh Tho, set out to file a complaint against Formosa for justice's sake, knowing that the government had been protecting this guilty company.*



Photo\_1 Protest Against Formosa Feb14\_2017 (Photo by Hoang Binh)

*In the evening of February 13, the victims rented vehicles in anticipation of the trip planned for the following morning. The police stopped the vehicles at the Giát Bridge intersection as the convoy tried to reach Song Ngoc.*

*In the morning of February 14, a number of drivers attempted to get to Song Ngoc. The police tried to intimidate and used all means to prevent this. The victims decided to use motorbikes instead. Over 100 participants did not own motorbikes and chose the challenging alternative of walking. Only 10 elderly victims chose to stay behind.*

*At approximately 7:30 a.m., the plaintiffs joyfully came out of the Song Ngọc Parish Church after praying, receiving blessings, and accepting rosaries for the road. Initially traffic police tried to facilitate the group's movement by controlling other traffic.*

*At Giát Bridge, Mr. Nguyễn Đức Hải - deputy director of Nghệ An Police - showed up, agreed to the group's renting a bus to transport 30 plaintiffs who were walking while requesting the remaining 70 pedestrians to go home. Only two mothers with young children decided to go home. The others continued on foot. The vehicles matched their speed with the walkers. The group was orderly and upbeat. Bystanders cheered them on.*

*At approximately noon time, the group stopped for lunch and a break in Yên Lý Parish. The group resumed their travel at 2:15 p.m. after praying with local residents in Yên Lý Church.*

*At approximately 4 p.m. the group was about 1 km from Traffic Police Station No. 5 in Diên Châu District's Diên Hồng Commune. A large group of traffic policemen supervised by Mr. Cao Minh Phương - chief of Nghệ An Traffic Police - began to divert the plaintiffs away from the main traffic.*

*At Traffic Police Station No. 5, the police used batons to force the group to stop in an open area by the roadside. When Rev. Nguyễn Đình Thục reached the spot, Mr. Phan Đình Sửu, a Nghệ An policeman, introduced Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, director of Nghệ An Province Police. Rev. Thục shook his hand and amiably greeted him.*

*Suddenly a group of plainclothes policemen attacked Rev. Thục, hurting his mouth and various spots on my body. The plaintiffs who were close to by pulling him away from the thuggish attackers. If the attackers had not been policemen, why did the police department director and all the other policemen allow the attack go unpunished?*

*The police beat the plaintiffs who carried cell phones or cameras when they were trying to record the attack, and seized or wrecked their equipment. Worse, the police took their money and other possessions. Several victims were forcibly removed and dropped off very far away after being robbed of everything. The police towed the car (used by Rev. Thục) away after breaking its windshield and windshield wipers.*

*The group of plaintiffs had been reinforced with those who joined along the way and people from nearby parishes who came after learning about police brutality.*

*The police stopped the bus driven by Mr. Nguyen Nam Phong that carried some parishioners in the protest parade and forced him to open the door and everyone on board to get out of the bus. He kept the doors shut to protect parishioners from brutality even though the bus was damaged by the thugs.*

*At approximately 4:30 p.m. the police suggested that Rev. Thục held a discussion with Mr. Lê Xuân Đại - vice chairman of the people's committee of Nghệ An. He adamantly refused because he believed that Mr. Đại was the one who just directed the thuggish and violent attack.*

*The priest who headed the committee for assisting Vinh Diocese victims of the Formosa waste discharge and the Đồng Tháp Parish priest talked Rev. Thuc into holding a discussion with Mr. Lê Xuân Đại. The group moved to an open area to talk with this official.*

*Mr. Lê Xuân Đại arrived quickly but did not speak to Rev. Thuc. The group suddenly realized that the government had tricked them in assembling them there for a violent assault, the second one in the day. At about 5 p.m. people saw - from a spot approximately 150 meters from where they stood - rocks and stones rising in the air as a result of many loud explosions. Immediately, hundreds of rapid-response policemen ran after the fleeing victims and indiscriminately beat them, not caring whether they were elderly, females, or children .*

*Seeing the developing situation, Rev. Thuc asked the plaintiffs to sit down and pray to calm ourselves. The loud explosions that were so close caused several to run. The police was waiting and immediately pursued them to beat them. Hundreds were beaten, with 30 victims severely hurt. Many were arrested and robbed of everything.*

*About 30 minutes later, when the rapid-response force no longer encircled us, the group went into Đồng Tháp Parish. At 8:30 p.m., Đồng Tháp Parish held a solemn vigil with candlelights to pray for the group's safety, joined by the priest and young people from Vạn Phần Parish. After the vigil, Đồng Tháp parishioners kindly hosted the group for the night.*

*At 5 a.m. on February 15, the Đồng Tháp priests celebrated a Mass to pray for the plaintiffs, Vietnam, justice, and the victims of the bloody crackdown of February 14, 2017. At about 7:30 a.m., upon receiving instructions from the bishop of Vinh, the plaintiffs group went home to avoid being ruthlessly attacked had they continued on. The government had issued this threat.*

*Over 600 plaintiffs - the victims- could testify that Nghệ An policemen had brutally attacked them. However, Document No. 1022/UBND-NC signed by Mr. Lê Xuân Đại - Deputy Chairman of the People's Committee of Nghệ An- claimed that the plaintiffs had attacked the police force under the direction of Rev Nguyễn Đình Thục.*

*On 3/3/2017, Rev. Thục, on behalf of the victims of the February 14 crackdown, submitted a complaint to the Central Government and the Nghe An Province government to denounce the provincial government's use of excessive force and request the prosecution of the culprits named in the complaint.*

### ***(Attachment\_2 Song Ngoc Parish Denouncement)***

#### **C. Persecution in Văn Thai Sub-parish (of Song Ngoc Parish).**

*Văn Thai, one of the 4 sub-parishes of Song Ngoc Parish, has 700 adherents. Văn Thai is in the 9th area of Sơn Hải Commune, Quỳnh Lưu District, Nghệ An. The 9th area is the only area with Catholics in Sơn Hải Commune. Văn Thai's isolation made it a favorite target for the government whose intent is to discourage all protests in Vinh Diocese against the environmental disaster caused by Formosa. Of note, groups of Red Shirts (thuggish individuals wearing red*

*shirts with the red national flag draped around their bodies) assaulted Catholics in full view of government personnel and policemen.*

*In the morning of May 28, 2017, the police and military of Quỳnh Lưu conducted exercises using explosives and live bullets next to the Van Thai Catholic Church, the start of their campaign to persecute Van Thai Catholics.*

*On May 30, 2017, over 100 men attacked Mr. Hồ Văn Thân in Quỳnh Long Commune. Thân had alerted the appropriate police and government official because he had an inkling that this would happen. The authorities did not show any concern. In the evening, over 1000 individuals surrounded Van Thai while Rev. Thục celebrated Mass. The thuggish crowd screamed insults at the adherents, threw bricks and rocks to damage their vehicles and a number of houses, desecrated the altar, injured Ms. Tâm, and beat Mr. Đoàn when he was trying to go home after the Mass.*

*In the evening of 31/5/2017, over 100 thugs destroyed many families' properties, costing several families hundreds of dollars each, e.g., Messrs Hải and Từ. Religious icons were also damaged.*

**(Attachment\_3 Van Thai Persecutions Report)**

The persecution campaign continued over a number of days:

*- Men wearing uniforms and holding national flags revved their motorbikes and blew their horns on the local streets in full view of policemen.*

*- Thugs threw rocks at night at the church and private homes, including throwing rocks at the volunteer Catholic peacekeepers. A number of motorbike riders dragged weapons along the road. They lit a bonfire near Song Ngọc Village at 2 am on June 11, 2017.*

*-Thugs used machetes to damage property, threaten family members, and chase away Ngô Văn Hải's customers from his home in Area 9, Sơn Hải Commune, Quỳnh Lưu District, Nghệ An, in the afternoon of June 11, 2017.*

*-Intimidated families and boat owners who had business dealings with the parishioners.*

*- Put up signs and banners in market places and along streets with messages to incite people to boycott and demand the removal of Rev. Nguyễn Đình Thục and Đặng Hữu Nam from Quỳnh Lưu District. Circulated petitions with the same message among families.*





Photo\_2 – Incite people to remove Rev. Nguyen Dinh Thuc from Quynh Luu district

The persecution increased in intensity :

*-In the morning of 26/6/ 2017, about 20 persons went to Quỳnh Thọ Market to falsely accuse that Văn Trường Catholics had removed the national flags from Sơn Thọ Bridge. Afterwards, they picked a fight with buyers who were at the market.*

*-In the evening, a large crowd gathered on Sơn Thọ Bridge, about 20 meters from the Văn Thái Church. They falsely claimed that 2 members of the Văn Thái Religious Practice Committee removed flags and then they threatened to attack the two (they called the victims and also said this.*

*-In the afternoon of July 5, 2017, a few non-Catholic people came to the church to get donated rice as usual. A group of suspicious individuals got there that evening and asked these people to return the donated rice to Mr. Thanh. Then they came to Mr. Thanh's house, insulted and threatened him, alleging that he was trying to ingratiate himself with non-Catholic people.*

*In the night of July 6, 2017 a group of about 30 people, led by Mr. Quỳnh Hoan, attacked a number of Văn Thái parishioners. About 10 people came straight to Mr. Nen's house and beat up Ms. Ha, Mr. Nen's daughter. They then came to Mr. Thanh's to curse and threaten him, and threw rocks and excrements into his home.*

*The government's use of thugs has caused fear, sleepless nights, and anxiety, leading to long-term psychological problems, especially among children.*

*More importantly, over the past several months the government has been targeting victims' livelihood, e.g., Messrs. Hải Tâm, Tì, Thanh, Danh, Anh, Phong, Hải Phương, and many others.*

***(Attachment\_4 Van Thai persecution victims)***

**D. Other persecution in Vinh Diocese:**

*The government targets not just Rev. Thục and Song Ngọc Parish. It also targets other priests and parishes. Red Flag Shirts, thuggish individuals, always show up (wearing red uniforms that have the national flags printed on these). They assaulted Catholics, screamed insults at priests and followers in plain view of the police or other government representatives. No one stopped them.*

*-Immediately after the Red Flag Shirts gather for a meeting, thugs would attack parishioners, throw rocks at churches, or subject priests to public denunciation sessions. After the April 2017 Red Flag Shirts gathering in Sơn Hải, thugs persecuted Văn Thai Catholics in May as previously described. On 10/29/2017 approximately 700 Red Flag Shirts met next to the Văn Thai Church to drink, eat, and defame Rev. Thục.*



Photo\_3 – Red Flag Association Conference near Van Thai church Oct29\_2017

*-On 10/31/2017, Priest Phạm Xuân Kế of Đông Tháp Parish and Priest Nguyễn Ngọc Ngự of Đông Kiều Parish were threatened by Red Flag Shirts after coming out of a meeting with the government of Diên Mỹ Commune, Diên Châu Province, Nghệ An.*

*- On 9/20/2017, a group carrying banners and flags went to Đông Kiều Parish Church to make trouble, demanding Priest Nguyễn Ngọc Ngũ's removal from Diên Mỹ Commune. The thugs desecrated religious icons and fired guns at residents' homes.*

*-On 12/13/2017, thugs assaulted parishioners in Đông Kiều Parish as they were decorating the manger for Christmas. A thug shot his home-made gas gun, injuring a teacher, Mr. Liên, in the head, and the victim had to go to a hospital. The thugs came near the church to tear down decorations and used a machete to damage a motorbike and wound a parishioner, Mr. Thuan, in the arm.*

*- On 12/17/2017, the government and police of Hưng Nguyên Commune, Hưng Tây District, threatened and disrupted irrigation work being done by a number of women from Ke Gai Parish on their cropland in Ao Lap, part of Bac Ke Gai Area of Hưng Tây Commune, Hưng Nguyên District, Nghệ An. Subsequently, more than 100 Red Flag Shirts attacked the female workers. When a number of male parishioners tried to intervene, the chief of police and chairman of the People's Committee of Hưng Tây Commune joined forces with the Red Flag Shirts to beat them up until they passed out. This was captured in another report.*

*-On 1/25/2018, the Diễn Châu District Lower Court was about to try 2 Vinh Diocese Catholics but was postpone until February: Hoàng Bình, a member of the Viet Labor movement and Nguyen Nam Phong, a bus driver who drove the bus carrying plaintiffs on the trip to submit a formal complaint against Formosa. Both are effectively supporting Rev. Thuc in reporting to the media the February 14, 2017 trip and help plaintiffs during the complain process. In February 6, 2018 the Nghe An court sentenced Mr. Nguyen Nam Phong 2 years in prison for "opposing with officials on duty" and Mr. Hoang Duc Binh a severe sentence of 14 in prison for "opposing official on duty" and "taking advantage of democratic freedom rights to violate the rights, national interest and legal interests of civic organization" per the article 257 and 258 of the 2015 Criminal Code.*





Photo\_4 Hong Binh and Nguyen Nam Phong at the Nghe An Court Feb6\_2018

**Which indications exist that the victim(s) has been targeted because of his/her religion or belief?**

*It is clear that the government's motive has been to hurt a particular religious group. After Formosa caused the environmental disaster, many affected victims filed complaints. The government's reprisal targeted only Vinh Diocese Catholics, particularly Song Ngọc parishioners who have not been compensated in spite of their livelihoods being totally ruined -Văn Thai Subdivision Catholics have been discriminated against when the government refused to pave roads in that community in spite of their repeated requests, unlike roads in other parts of the commune.*

*-Attacks by the government in Văn Thai typically included desecrating sacred symbols of the Church.*

*-Identification of the alleged perpetrator(s), name(s) if known and/or function, suspected motive:*

- *Are the perpetrator(s) known to the victim? Yes.*
- *Are State agents or non-State actors believed to be responsible for the alleged violation? State agents, namely government employees, policemen, etc.*

*-If the perpetrators are believed to be State agents, please specify (police, military, agents of security services, unit to which they belong, rank and functions, etc.), and indicate why they are believed to be responsible; be as precise as possible.*

List of perpetrators for the Hà Tĩnh Province incident of 2/14/2017:

1. Nguyễn Xuân Đường, Chairman of Nghệ An Province People's Committee, overall leader.
2. Lê Xuân Đại, Deputy Chairman of Nghệ An Province People's Committee, supervised the 2/14/2017 crackdown.
3. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, Director of Nghệ An Province Police, directed the attacks on protesters.

4. Nguyễn Đức Hải, Deputy Director of Nghệ An Province Police, directed the attacks on protesters.
5. Cao Minh Phương, Commander, Traffic Police of Nghệ An, supervised the pushing of the protesters into an open area by the highway to set them up for the attack by the police.
6. Hoàng Danh Lai, Chairman of Quỳnh Lưu District People's Committee, bears responsibility for his subordinates below.
7. Tạ Đình Tuấn, Quỳnh Lưu District Police Commander, directed the persecution in Văn Thai over a number of months.
8. Hồ Ngọc Dũng, Deputy Chairman of Quỳnh Lưu District People's Committee, developed devious plans to persecute people in Văn Thai.
9. Trần Văn Hùng, Chairman of the People's Committee of Sơn Hải Commune, carried out orders and engaged in the persecution in Văn Thai.
10. Chu Thế Huyền, Chairman of Diễn Châu District People's Committee
11. Red Flag Shirts: many members enthusiastically attack residents (names will be provided later because these individuals came and went quickly and it is difficult to identify them). The most senior government leader in Nghe An Province, Mr. Lê Xuân Đại, was one of the plotters in terms of luring the protesters to a specific spot by the roadside to facilitate the police crackdown. Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, Nghệ An Police Director, did nothing to stop thugs and policemen when they assaulted Rev. Thục during the trip to file a complaint against Formosa on 2/14/2017.

-If identification as State agents is not possible, do you believe that government authorities or persons linked to them are responsible for the incident? Why?

*Not applicable.*

-If there are witnesses to the incident, indicate their names, ages, relationship, and contact addresses. If they wish to remain anonymous, indicate if they are relatives, by-passers, etc.; if there is evidence, please specify.

*Witnesses included the victims listed in this report*

**(4). Steps taken by the victim, his/her family, or anyone else on his/her behalf?**

- Please indicate if complaints have been filed, when, by whom, and before which State authorities or competent bodies (i.e., police, prosecutor, court, etc.).
- *On 3/3/2017, Rev. Nguyễn Đình Thục, on behalf of more than 600 parishioners (on the 2/14/2017 trip to submit a complaint against Formosa), sent complaints about the crackdown to the Central Government and local government condemning the use of excessive force by Nghệ An Province officials, and requesting the prosecution of Mr. Lê Xuân Đại, Deputy Chairman of Nghe An Province People's Committee, and Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, Director of Nghệ An Province Police, for preventing citizens from filing a court complaint which is their right provided by the law, and for ordering a libel and defamation campaign by their controlled media against the victims, per Document No. 1022*

**(Attachment\_2 Song Ngoc Parish Denouncement).**

- Were there any other steps taken?

-On 6/29/2017, *Hồ Văn Từ* sent a request for an investigation of the destruction of his property and theft when the thugs attacked *Văn Thai* on 5/31/2017.

-On 7/8/2017, *Rev. Thục* sent his report on incidents in *Văn Thai* to various Catholic offices in *Vinh Diocese*.

- Steps taken by the authorities:

*None.*

- Indicate whether or not, to your knowledge, there have been investigations by the State authorities; if so, what kind of investigations? Please indicate progress and status of these investigations as well as which other measures have been taken.

*None.*

*In fact, the Central Government has been trying to minimize the publicity of the Formosa environmental disaster. There is little hope that it will do anything substantial to punish the local government for the violent assault on peaceful citizens doing what the law allowed them to do.*

- In case of complaints by the victim or his family, how have those authorities or other competent bodies dealt with them? What has been the outcome of those proceedings?

*We don't know what kind of official inquiry would result. However, we would like the international community and human rights organizations to hear our story of misery for thousands of citizens after losing all and being violently attacked just for trying to seek justice and asking for the right to live in a safe and healthful environment.*

**(5). Identity of the person or institution submitting this form:**

- Family name: *Nguyễn*, Middle name: *Đình*, Given name: *Thục* - *Parish Pastor*

- Contact number or address (please indicate country and area code): telephone: +84-98-8821327.

Email: *jbdinhthuc@gmail.com* Skype Name: *none*

- Individual or organization authorized to represent: *Individual*

- Status: *Pastor of Song Ngoc Parish*

- Do you act with knowledge and on behalf of the victim(s)? *Yes*

-Please state whether you want your identity to be kept confidential: *Non confidential*

Date you are submitting this form: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of the author