

## Taiwanese plant's toxic dumping threatens the health and livelihood of millions in Vietnam

### Century-old Dong Yen Parish faces disappearance

Prepared by "Save Dong Yen" Campaign

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In early April 2016, toxic waste dumped into the sea by a Taiwanese-owned steel plant contaminated some 200 km of Vietnam's coastline. Located next to this steel plant, Dong Yen Parish suffers the full impacts of this brewing environmental disaster while continuing to be targeted by the local government's anti-religion policy.

In 2008, Dong Yen Parish residents were the first to oppose Ky Anh District's decision to lease 3,300 hectares of land, for a term of 70 years, to Formosa Plastics Groups for its steel complex. This Taiwanese-owned multinational chemistry company is known for its poor environmental track record. In 2009, its owners were selected for the Black Planet Award by the Foundation for Ethics & Economics (<https://www.ethecon.org/en/902>).

As the district government ignored their concerns, on 20<sup>th</sup> of March, 2011 thousands of Dong Yen parishioners participated in an anti-Formosa protest. The district government subsequently ordered the relocation of the entire parish to a remote mountainous area. The government promised to the Bishop of Vinh Diocese, which includes Dong Yen Parish, that the relocation area would benefit from eco-tourism. About 4,000 parishioners reluctantly moved only to find out that they would be split into two disjointed communities, and there was no eco-tourism but only an artillery base nearby and no arable land. Some 158 families (800 people) resisted relocation, determined to save their century-old parish from permanent elimination.

On 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2015, the government sent in its mobile police unit to seize land, destroy homes, and bring down religious edifices, turning a once thriving community into a desolate sight. As the demolition team cordoned off the Dong Yen church for destruction, parishioners used themselves as human shields to protect the prime symbol of their faith. The police brutally

attacked them causing injuries to several parishioners, including four women – one of them being pregnant – and a Catholic nun.

The government also took children hostage to force parishioners to relocate. The government sent in demolition team to destroy the village's only school and barred children from going to any other school. Adults who volunteered to teach the children at their homes were subjected to threats and harassment by the government. Thus, all 153 children and youth of Dong Yen Parish whose family defied the relocation order were without education for over two years. Only after students and parents protested in front of the Ky Loi Commune People's Committee in August 2016 did the government lift its ban on education. The children can now attend in a nearby school, but face difficulty caused by their extended absence from school and also by discriminatory actions by school officials.

In early April 2016, fisherfolks in Dong Yen Parish started to observe the death of farmed fish, followed by tons of dead fish washing ashore. The environmental disaster rapidly spread to 4 provinces in Central Vietnam: Ha Tinh, Quang Tri, Quang Binh and Thua Thien-Hue, affecting the livelihood of not only fishermen but millions of residents in the region. Many people also reported signs of illness; a number of divers employed by Formosa Steel Plant displayed symptoms of poisoning; one of them died and others remain in poor health.

As their concerns were ignored by all levels of government, local fishermen did their own investigation and found a 1.5km-long pipeline, 1m in diameter, discharging yellowish waste into the ocean. They observed a vast area of the sea with only dead or dying coral reefs and almost no fish and mollusks. On 26<sup>th</sup> April, Thua Thien-Hue's Office of Natural Resources and Environment announced test results showing concentrations of heavy metals in seawater exceeding allowable levels, and warned residents against sea swimming until further notice.

Ironically, on the same day Mr. Dang Ngoc Son, Deputy Chair of the People's Committee of Ha Tinh Province, went on television urging people to swim at sea and consume seafood as usual. The following day, Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Vo Tuan Nhan held a press conference in Ha Noi to affirm that there was no sign of cause-effect relationship between Formosa Steel Plant and the spreading dead fish phenomenon. When asked about the abnormally high concentration levels of heavy metal found in seawater, he quipped that such a question would harm national interests.

Reacting to the government's lack of transparency, thousands of people joined a mass protest in Quang Binh Province on 28<sup>th</sup> of April. Similar protests soon broke out in Da Nang, Hai Phong, Vung Tau, Nha Trang and Saigon. The public security police brutally cracked down on the peaceful protesters. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement of concern regarding the government's unnecessary use of force.

On 30<sup>th</sup> April, the Chairman of Natural Resources and Environment of Da Nang City, which was in the affected area, and other city government officials were photographed by reporters while

dipping in seawater. The following day, the Minister of Information and Communication Truong Minh Tuan and staff of several state-run newspapers showcased their consumption of sea fish caught in the vicinity Formosa Steel Plant; he called on the public to demonstrate patriotism by eating seafood and swimming in the sea.

A state-owned publication (Countryside Today) was fined 140 million VND (6,300 USD) for an article expressing sympathy with affected fisherfolks. A number of civil society activists visiting the affected areas were blocked, threatened, or arrested. Some were reportedly tortured while in police custody.

On 30<sup>th</sup> June, almost three months after the environmental disaster had broken out, Minister and Chairman of Government Office Mai Tien Dung announced at a press conference that Formosa had admitted its wrongdoing and agreed to pay 500 million USD in fines and compensation. Minister Dung asked the affected people to show generosity and forgiveness towards Formosa.

This announcement was met with public anger as people affected had been completely shut out of the negotiation with Formosa about compensation level. The government-negotiated compensation level would amount to only 10% to 25% of the pre-disaster monthly household income for most families. This compensation would only cover 6 months while most experts projected that full recovery of the ecology and fishery would take decades.

To the dismay of local residents, Formosa Steel Plant was caught illegally dumping hundreds of tons of solid wastes in half a dozen places. While Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc had earlier threatened to evict Formosa from Vietnam if caught with another incident of illegal dumping, the government has so far taken no action against Formosa.

Meanwhile, a Taiwanese television program aired an investigative documentary raising suspicion of Formosa's involvement in the mass fish death. On 1<sup>st</sup> August, Taiwan Parliamentarian Su Chih Fen led a media delegation to Vietnam to look into the operations of Formosa Steel Plant. The Vietnamese authorities confiscated her passport, held her at Noi Bai Airport, and only released her nine hours later as public and diplomatic pressure mounted.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> August, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Truong Hong Ha held a press conference in Dong Ha, Quang Tri Province to announce that the ocean was now safe for swimming and seafood safe for consumption. He and a dozen government officials then went dipping in seawater and ostensibly consuming local seafood. Three days later officials from the Ministry of Health warned people from consuming seafood coming from the affected areas.

Frustrated with increasingly clear intention of the government to whitewash the environmental disaster and protecting the perpetrator, on 26<sup>th</sup> September, thousands of residents in Quynh Luu and Ky Anh Districts came to the People's Court of Ky Anh District to file over 500 law suits against Formosa Steel Plant. The following week, over ten thousand district residents held a demonstration in front of Formosa Steel Plant to demand justice and judicial due process. A few

days later, the Ky Anh District People's Court returned all filings, explaining to the plaintiffs that the case had been resolved through agreement between Formosa and the central government.

For the past eight months, families in Dong Yen Parish have been without income because local fishery, their only means of livelihood, had been completely destroyed. None of them has received assistance from the government. In-kind and monetary relief sent from benefactors in other parts of the country or from overseas has been blocked by the government.

For over half a century Dong Yen Parish has been targeted for religious persecution by the local government. Over the years, a dozen parishioners were sent to prison for standing up to the government. In 1969, the government accused the parish's chaplain, Rev. Vu Van Giao, of being reactionary and mobilized over 3000 police and military personnel carrying weapons to surround the parish in order to arrest him. After 72 days of standoff, the government troops withdrew. Ever since, the government has repeatedly found new ways to disrupt the life of Dong Yen parishioners. On May 1, 1979 the government abducted Rev. Nguyen Dang Dien. After 3 months of unsuccessful search, the parishioners went to the Prime Minister's office to petition for an answer. The government released Rev. Dien but forced him to move to another parish.

In the Formosa Steel Complex the local government found a pretext to remove Dong Yen Parish once for all. On 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2014, Nguyen Van Bong, then-Chairman of the People's Committee of Ky Anh District, signed Decision No. 7008/QD-UBND ordering the seizure of all lands in Dong Yen Parish. On 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2015, Le Xuan Vuong, Chairman of the People's Committee of Ky Loi Commune, signed Announcement No. 39/TB/UBND to prohibit volunteers from teaching the 153 children and youth in Dong Yen Parish. On 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2015, the People's Committee of Ky Anh District issued Announcement No. 147/TB/UBND about dismantling the Parish's community house, its bible school, and its church; the announcement also banned all religious activities at the Dong Yen Church and ordered the removal of all assets from the church before the 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2015 deadline. It was signed by Mr. Duong Thanh Hoa, Deputy Chair of Ky Anh District's People's Committee.

Then on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2015, the new Chairman of Ky Anh District People's Committee, Nguyen Quoc Ha, signed Announcement No. 1187 /TB/UBND to again order that Dong Yen Church be dismantled. On 12<sup>th</sup> January, 2016, Chu Van Quang, Deputy Chair of Ky Anh District People's Committee signed Announcement No. 03/TB/UBND banning all construction work in Dong Yen Parish.

The parishioners who had relocated to the two new communities continued to face religious persecution. Residents in one community put up the pedestal upon which to erect the statue of the Virgin Mary. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfjxUVDnJdk>). On October 22, 2016 the public security police came in and smashed into pieces the pedestal during construction, and brutally beat up women who tried to protect it. Faced with the hardship and persecution in their relocation areas, some 30 families have returned to Dong Yen Parish, where they live in makeshift tents. In December 2016, the Ky Anh District government announced that their

makeshift homes would be destroyed by March 2017 so that they must return to their relocation areas.

With the support from the Bishop's Court, many Catholic priests and the Catholic community of Vinh Diocese, the remaining 158 families of Dong Yen Parish have successfully fought off the government's repeated attempts to eliminate their parish. However, with the added threat to their livelihood and health, these families need support to:

- (1) Push back all administrative measures or use of force by the local government to dislocate parishioners;
- (2) Sue Formosa Steel Plant for compensation and for its eviction from Vietnam; and
- (3) Create alternative means of livelihood so as to sustain their protracted fight for justice.

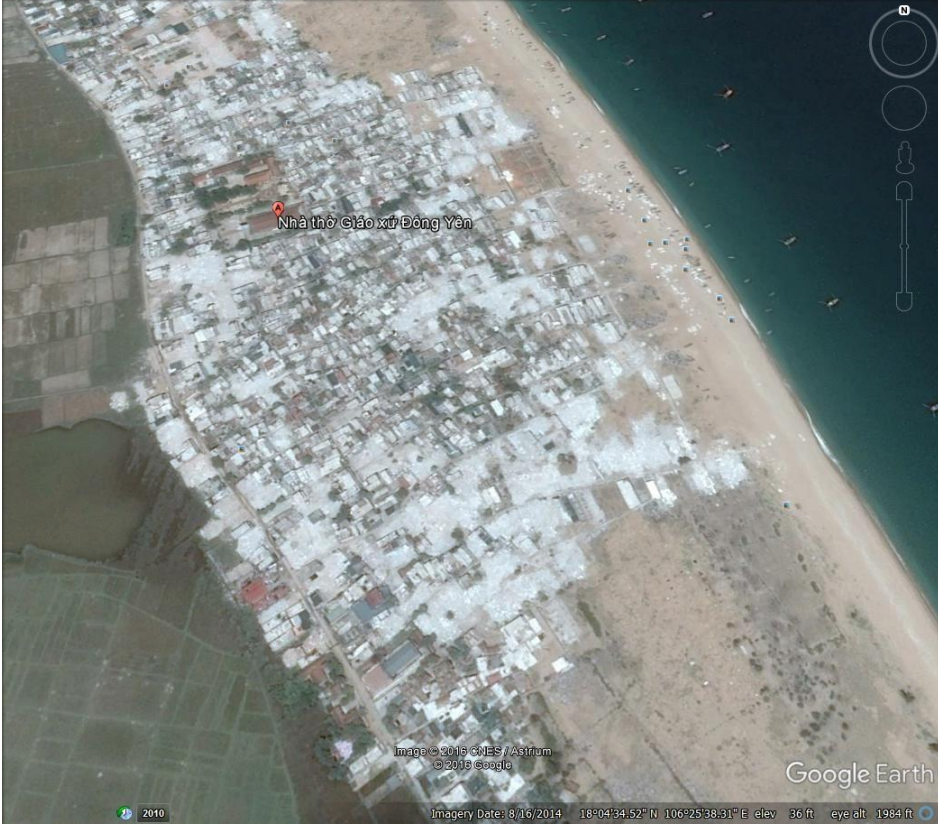
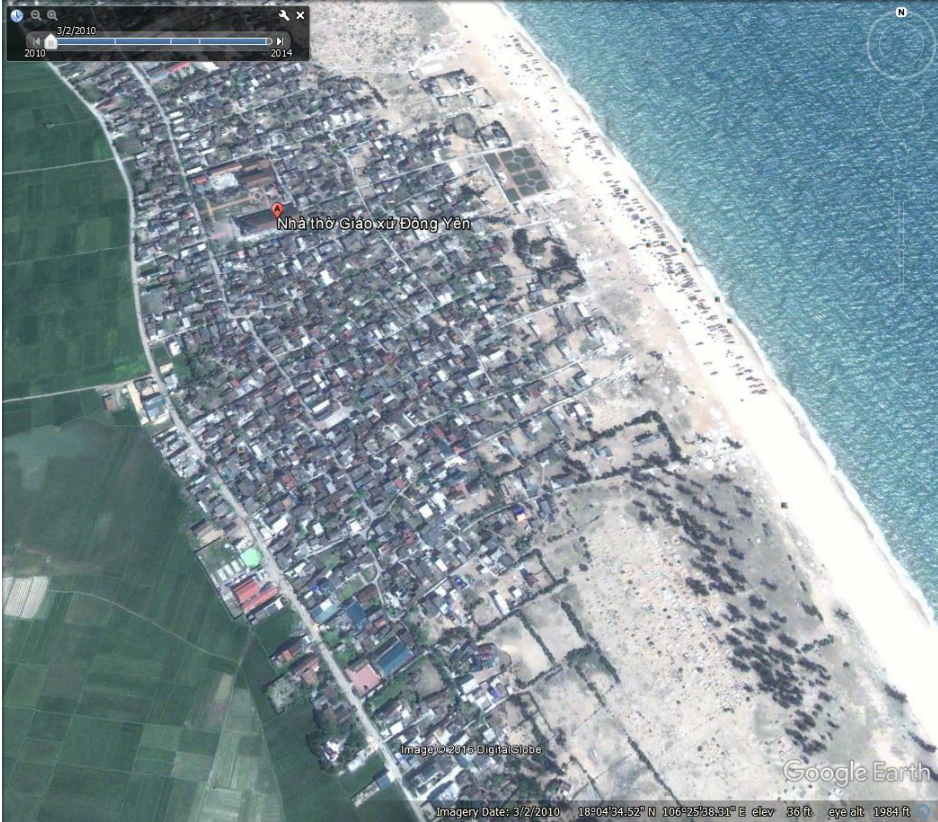
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# Dong Yen Parish located in proximity of Formosa Steel Complex



Dong Yen Parish before and after demolition by order of Ky Anh District government



Dong Yên Parish before and after demolition





The chaplain's house reduced to rubbles



What left of Dong Yen's bible school



Dong Yen parishioners defending their church from being demolished





Students and parents praying for the return to school, recovery from the environmental disaster and the preservation of their parish, August 6, 2016

