

Red Flag Associations: An emerging threat to Catholic communities in Vietnam
An update by BPSOS, January 17, 2019

The rise of the Red Flag Associations in Nghe An Province is closely related to the government's suppression of popular protests against the Taiwanese-owned Formosa Steel Plant, which has caused the worst ecological disaster in Vietnam's contemporary history.

In early April 2016, residents along the coastline of four provinces in Central Vietnam, Ha Tinh, Quang Tri, Quang Binh and Thua Thien-Hue, discovered large volumes of dead fish washing ashore. Residents in communities surrounding the Formosa Steel Plant in Ha Tinh Province reported seeing a large level of waste dumped by the plant into the ocean. According to Amnesty International, as many as 270,000 people, including fishermen, women, and others who rely on the fishing industry for their livelihood as well as that of their families, were affected by the deaths of millions of fish.¹

As mass protests broke out against the Formosa Steel Plant, in which demonstrators demanded environmental justice and fair compensation, the government violently attacked them and arrested those suspected of being key organizers.

Red Flag Associations are a new phenomenon in Vietnam: non-state actors that systematically commit egregious violations of human rights, specifically targeting Catholic communities that challenge the government's handling of the Formosa Steel Plant-induced disaster. For years the Vietnamese police had been known for their use of thugs to attack peaceful demonstrators.² However, these thugs are assembled for one specific operation and then go their separate ways so as to give the appearance of spontaneity. On the contrary, Red Flag Associations are organized, apparently with a common agenda:

- To suppress and hamper attempts aimed at filing complaints or protesting against the Formosa Steel Plant;
- To sow divisions between non-Catholics and Catholics, and rally non-Catholics to boycott business transactions with targeted Catholic communities;
- To intimidate parishioners by vilifying their priests, attacking their lay leaders, and desecrating their church and homes.

¹ Amnesty International, Urgent Action, June 1, 2017, available at <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/uaa12617-1.pdf>

² "No Country for Human Rights Activists," Human Rights Watch, June 18, 2017, available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/06/18/no-country-human-rights-activists/assaults-bloggers-and-democracy-campaigners>

The appearance of a Red Flag group was first reported in Nghe An Province. On May 8, 2017 the state media of Nghe An Province carried news that 600 members of the Farmers Association, hundreds of members of the Women’s Union and thousands of “concerned” citizens in the province demonstrated against Rev. Dang Huu Nam, priest of Phu Yên Parish, and Rev. Nguyen Dinh Thuc, priest of Song Ngọc Parish, calling for their expulsion from these localities. A few days later the Director of the Public Security Department of Nghe An Province, Nguyen Huu Cau, was quoted in the news condemning these two Catholic priests as “extremist subjects using religion as camouflage”.³

In mid-October 2017, the Red Flag Associations announced their inaugural convention titled “Networking – Introducing the Alliance of Red Flag Associations – Son Hai Commune, Dien My Commune, Hanoi and neighboring communes – Protecting National Security” to be held next to the Catholic church of Van Thai Sub-parish of Song Ngọc Parish.

Notified by the local government of the upcoming public event, on October 26 Rev. Nguyen Dinh Thuc, the parish priest, wrote to the local authorities protesting the gathering of hundreds of Red Flag members next to the sub-parish’s church. As his parish had been brutally attacked and ransacked by Red Flag members just a few months before, the coming together of Red Flag Associations near Van Thai Church would have an intimidating effect on his parishioners. The authorities did not respond to his protest.



Gathering of Red Flag Association next to the Van Thai Catholic Church in Nghe An Province, October 29, 2017

³ Interview published on May 24, 2017 in “Cong An Nghe An”, the organ of the Public Security Department of Nghe An Province: <http://congannghean.vn/an-ninh-trat-tu/201705/xu-ly-nghiem-cac-chuc-sac-cuc-doan-loi-dung-ton-giao-de-kich-dong-gay-roi-739323/>

As scheduled, on October 29 some 700 Red Flag members from Hanoi and the Communes of Son Hai, Dien My, Dien Chau and An Hoa assembled next to the Van Thai Church. All the speakers at the event took turns to defame Rev. Nguyen Dinh Thuc, the priest of Song Ngoc Parish, and Rev. Dang Huu Nam, the priest of Phu Yen Parish, and called for their removal. See in Appendix II the full incident report submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

For his safety, in February 2018 the Bishop's Court of Vinh Diocese transferred Rev. Dang Huu Nam to a new parish – My Khanh Parish, located in the Tien Khanh and Khanh Hoa Neighborhoods, Khanh Thanh Village, Yen Thanh District, Nghe An Province. A new Red Flag Association was formed in the new place to harass and threaten him. On September 3, 2018, Mr. Nguyen Dinh Tho, accompanied by two other men wearing only under-pant and no shirt, twice intruded into the Church, threatened to kill Rev. Nam. They returned the third time but left when parishioners gathered, ready to fight them off. On October 20, 2018 the Red Flag Association was formed. At its formation ceremony, a number of members of the Red Flag Association from Son Hai, Quynh Luu District, Nghe An Province were also present. They presented the new Red Flag Association with gongs and red flags. Their slogan: To deal with Rev. Dang Huu Nam.

Mr. Nguyen Van Hoi, Communist Party Chief of Tien Khanh Neighborhood, authored a letter denouncing Rev. Nam. Signed by many community members, it was sent to different levels of government authorities. Later on, many community members protested the Communist Party Chief for having forged their signatures. On November 23, 2018, Mr. Nguyen Van Hoang, Hoi's son-in-law and grandson of the Communist Party Chief of Khanh Hoa Neighborhood, intruded in the Church of My Khanh Parish and screamed vulgarities and death threat at Rev. Nam. A week later, a public denunciation session was organized at the office of the People's Committee of Khanh Thanh Village, with the presence of Yen Thanh District and Nghe An Province authorities, targeting Rev. Nam. In the presence of the state media, leading members of the local Red Flag Association took turn to denounce Rev. Nam and called for his eviction from the area. Other Red Flag Association members took their denunciation to the social media, insulting and threatening to kill Rev. Nam.

Both the report on international religious freedom of the State Department and the report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom for 2017 featured the threat of the Red Flag Associations, non-state actors acting on behalf of the local and provincial governments. In preparation for the review of Vietnam's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Human Rights Committee has requested a response from the Vietnamese government about its dealing with the Red Flag Associations:

“...please clarify whether hate speech is prohibited by law and the measures taken to investigate, prosecute and, if convicted, punish

members of organizations, such as the “Red Flag Associations”, or others involved in propaganda activities that promote and incite religious discrimination, violence and hate speech.” See https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2fVNM%2fQ%2f3&Lang=en

“If that association was not established by the government, then why did the government have to notify us [of its upcoming gathering]? Moreover, its prior gatherings were always held in the government building. No association without the blessing of the government may enter a government building to conduct activities.”⁴

Rev. Dang Huu Nam, former priest of Phu Yen Parish, BBC interview on October 30, 2017. A target of the local Red Flag Association, he was recently reassigned to another parish.



BPSOS’s full report on the Red Flag Associations can be found at: <http://dvov.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BPSOS-Report-on-Red-Flag-Associations-03-27-18.pdf>

⁴ “Nghe An Province: Red Flag Association, spontaneous but approved?”, available at <http://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-41801662>