

VNWHR - FOR PRESS CONFERENCE – GENEVA PRESS CLUB — MARCH 12, 2019

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Tuyet Ngoc Dinh from Vietnamese Women for Human Rights, a member of FORUM-ASIA.

In the last recent years, the Vietnamese government continued its restrictions and violations of universally recognized human rights and inconsistencies with its treaty obligations. Specifically, regarding the rights of children, women and women human rights defenders, there were little or no signs of improvement. Women attempting to exercise their rights to free association, assembly, religion or belief, expression, were seemingly systematically punished either through legal instruments in Vietnam's Penal Code or through actions taken outside the law yet seemingly connected to the State, or both. Violent attacks, arbitrary arrests, lack of a fair trial, smear campaigns, travel bans, and detention persisted for women human rights defenders with little or no chance for inquiry, investigation, recourse, or justice.

In its report titled “*Out of the shadows: Shining light on the response to child sexual abuse and exploitation*” released on January 16, 2019, The Economist's Intelligence Unit studied 40 countries and ranked them on how their governments responded to the threat of sexual violence against children. Vietnam is ranked 37 out of the 40 countries studied. Vietnam scores only 38/100 in terms of government commitment and capacity to fight sexual abuses against children, and only 17/100 in terms of engagement of industry, civil society and media.

The stalled investigation into repeated sexual abuses of **five young girls** in 2005 by a 63-year old cleric of the Cao Dai Tay Ninh Sect, a sect established by the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1997 to eventually displace the original Cao Dai Religion, established in 1926 illustrates how Vietnam's justice system has failed the victims. **All five victims, aged 9-12** at the time, were students at Sở Đồng Nhi, a school for orphaned girls and those from poor families. As of today, the perpetrator continues to live in Tay Ninh as a free man.

Our organization's membership is made up mostly by members of persecuted groups such as Catholics, Baptists, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Buddhists. Our members and their families are victims of religious persecution in Vietnam.

Many ethnic women and children and their families in the **Hmong and Montagnard Christians** communities are suffering the stateless condition for refusing to renounce their faiths. The authorities denied to issue citizenship IDs, birth certificates, and marriage certificates to their families' members, blocking their children full access to education and other benefits programs.

There is increasing use by the Vietnamese government of non-state actors such as Red Flag Associations, a forms of organized mobs created and support by local government. In 2017, the Red Flag Association members, apparently under the direction of the Chairman of the People's Committee and the Police Chief of Hung Tay Commune, violently attacked **20 women members** of Ke Gai Parish victims without provocation. The victims formally filed a complaint, but their complaint has been so far ignored by government authorities from the local to the provincial levels. Instead, by initiating prosecution against the key witness, it appears that the Public Security Department of Nghe An Province intends to intimidate the victims into abandoning their pursuit of justice.

Ms. Nguyen Thi Hanh is a member of the local Nam Hoai Nhon Cao Dai Temple in Binh Dinh Province was violently attacked by Mr. Nguyen Van Hai, a follower of the Cao Dai Tay Ninh Sect in 2017. She later filed a lawsuit with the People's Court of Hoai Nhon District against Mr. Hai, demanding a compensation to cover her medical costs. For two years, Ms. Hanh encountered many roadblocks in her pursuit of justice because the entire law enforcement and court system of Hoai Nhon District appear to be biased in favor of the Cao Dai Tay Ninh Sect, which was created in 1997 by the order of the Vietnamese Communist Party and received strong support by the government.

While the Vietnamese authorities target and imprison religious leaders who are primary men, their wives bear the brunt of the persecution. The Vietnamese government has the practice of detaining political or religious prisoners far away from their home and moving them among different prisons frequently with no advance communication or notice to their wives or families. The authorities intentionally create hardships on prisoners' family finance on travel expense and time-consuming and dangerous trips to visit the prisoners.

Mrs. Nguyen Thi Lanh, wife of two-time religious prisoner, Protestant pastor Nguyen Trung Ton who was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to 12 years in prison in 2018. Mrs. Lanh is constantly harassed by the local authorities and police.

Mrs. Tran Thi Nga, a labor activist and a blogger who had covered many issues including police brutality, human trafficking, unlawful land grabbing and labour abuses, was sentenced to nine years imprisonment plus an additional five years of house arrest after she was convicted under Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code for spreading “anti-state propaganda” in videos and articles she posted online. Tran Thi Nga was arbitrarily transferred by the authorities to Gia Trung prison in Gia Lai province, a distance of over 1,000 km from her home in Ha Nam. Nga was denied the rights to receive visitations from her family members. Nga was held incommunicado for almost three months

Ms. Doan Thi Hong, 36-year-old single mother and a member of the unregistered group Hien Phap (Constitution), which aims to promote civil and political rights by disseminating Vietnam's 2013 Constitution. After participating in a peaceful mass demonstration in HCM City in June 2018 to protest two draft bills on Special Economic Zones and on Cyber Security, Hong was kidnapped by plainclothes agents in District 12 in HCM City on September 2, 2018. Her daughter Doan Ngoc Ha Vy was just over 30 months old when Hong was detained. The city's police has since not allowed family face-to-face visit. Ms. Hong is charged with “disruption of security” under Article 118 of the 2015 Penal Code and therefore access to her attorney was not permitted during the investigation period. She is facing imprisonment of up to 15 years if convicted.

Another method of harassment and punishment commonly used against women human rights defenders is the restriction of their free movement, including restrictions within Vietnam and the blocking of international travel. The authorities banned many women human rights defenders: **Pham Thanh Nghien, Huynh Thuc Vy, Nguyen Xuan Mai** from traveling abroad. Huynh Thuc Vy's passport was confiscated in July 2015. Most recently, on March 7th, 2019, **Ms. Bui Kim Phuong** was detained for questioning for more than two hours by the airport security and banned from traveling to Europe to advocate for her husband, lawyer **Nguyen Bac Truyen**, a human rights advocate and two-time prisoner of conscience. In all cases, the police cited vague security reason for the ban.

Since 2016, VNWHR's Emergency Assistant program has successfully applied and secured more than \$60,000.00 USD in emergency assistance for many human rights defenders, former and current prisoners of conscience and their families for medical treatments, legal assistances, prison visits, and emergency expenses from several international human rights organizations

VNWHR has provided trainings and assistance to women from various communities, in developing their capacity to carry out programs for and by themselves in their own communities. VNWHR provided laptops and smart phones for key members to support themselves while they conduct their work with their community members.

Vietnamese ethnic children and women, women human rights defenders, family members of prisoners of conscience including mothers, wives, and their children's sufferings and struggles are often not known or recognized by domestic and the international human rights community.

VNWHR welcomes partnership and collaboration from all CSOs and international human rights community to raise awareness on issues of women's rights and human rights violations against children and women. By working together, we can advocate, promote, and protect freedom and dignity for all women in Vietnam.

Thank you!