

Adopting Vietnamese Prisoners of Conscience
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Since July 2013, BPSOS has encouraged members of the US Congress to adopt Vietnamese prisoners of conscience under the Defending Freedom Project of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. For 2020, we propose the priority list below.

(1) Nguyen Bac Truyen (m)



A peaceful human rights defender, he received the 2011 Hellman Hammett Award of Human Rights Watch. He was arbitrary arrested in 2006 and sentenced to 3.5 years in prison, plus 2 years of house arrest due to his pro-democracy activism. Since his release from the first prison term, Mr. Truyen focused much of his efforts on defending and promoting religious freedom. As a jurist, he also provided pro-bono legal assistance to families of political prisoners, victims of land grabs and persecuted religious communities in Vietnam. By the time of his second arrest, Mr. Truyen had worked full-time for a few years as the Coordinator of the charitable program for the disabled veterans of the former Republic of Vietnam operated by the Catholic Church of the Redemptorist in Saigon.

On July 30 2017, he was abducted on the street and on April 5, 2018 was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment, followed by 3 years of house arrest on charge of "carrying out activities aiming to overthrow the government" in the same case as 5 members of Brotherhood for Democracy: human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai and his assistant Le Thu Ha, Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton, Pham Van Troi and Truong Minh Duc. His appeal was denied by the Appellate Court on June 4, 2018. He is currently being held at An Diem prison in Quang Nam Province, a thousand km away from his wife and family in Saigon. In 2019, the US Commission for International Religious Freedom adopted Truyen as a religious prisoner of conscience.

(2) Bui Van Trung (m) and Bui Van Tham (m).



Bui Van Trung is the head of a Hoa Hao Buddhist family whose 5 members (including Mr. Trung) have been imprisoned due to their faith. Mr. Bui Van Trung and his son, Bui Van Tham, are currently behind bars for the second time.

Vietnam requires all religious entities to register and be approved by the government. Mr. Trung, however, adhered to the independent home-worship concept of Hoa Hoa Buddhism. In 2005 Mr. Trung built a prayer hall in the yard of his house in An Phu District, An Giang Province to provide fellow Hoa Hao Buddhists with a place for congregating, studying the Hoa Hao scripture, praying, and engaging in celebrations and other religious rituals. The government accused Mr. Trung of breaking the law and ordered him to close the prayer hall. Due to his refusal to close the prayer hall and join the state-controlled Hoa Hao Buddhist Congregation, Bui Van Trung and Bui Van Tham were arrested in 2012. Mr. Trung was sentenced to four years in prison and Bui Van Tham to two and a half years. Then, in 2014 Mr. Trung's son-in-law was also arrested and sentenced to two and a half years in prison. All three men served their full sentences.

Less than a year since his release from prison, Mr. Trung was arrested again in June 2017 when he and other Hoa Hao Buddhists gathered in the prayer hall for the commemoration of the death of his mother. His son Bui Van Tham was among those arrested. Father and son were tried on February 9, 2018 along with Mr. Trung's wife and their daughter and two other Hoa Hao Buddhists under Article 245 of the 1999 Penal Code, "disrupting public order." Bui Van Trung and Bui Van Tham each received a six-year prison sentence. Mr. Trung's daughter, Bui Thi Bich Tuyen, was sentenced to 3 years in prison, and his wife, Le Thi Hen, received a 2-year suspended sentence on account of her poor health. Their appeals were denied by the People's Court of An Giang Province. Bui Van Trung is in poor health and his vision is failing.

(3) Pastor A Dao (m)



Before his arrest, Pastor A Dao, of ethnic Ha Lang, was the lead pastor of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ. He advocated for religious freedom for his fellow church members in the Central Highlands and elsewhere. In August 2016, he attended the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief (SEAFORB) Conference and also the ASEAN Civil Society Conference / ASEAN People's Forum in Timor Leste. He was arrested shortly after his return to Vietnam.

On April 28, 2017 he was sentenced to five years in prison for "helping individuals to escape abroad illegally" under Article 91 of the country's Penal Code. He denied the charge and claimed his innocence. Just before the trial started, he was allowed a brief visit by his wife and two fellow members of his Church; he told them that he had been repeatedly tortured as he resisted forced confession. He had large observable bruises on his face.

Pastor A Dao's health has deteriorated as a result of the harsh treatment typically reserved for prisoners of conscience. It was reported that he was tortured in late 2019. Without viable means of livelihood, his wife had to sell their land and move in with her own relatives after sending their two school-age children to live separately with different relatives. His son is now 16 and his daughter 6 years old.

(4) Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton (m)



Converted to Christianity in 2003, Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton had been frequently harassed by the police until he was arrested in 2011. He was subsequently sentenced to two years in prison, on charges of “anti-state propaganda” under Article 88 of the penal code. After release from prison he started his mission to help other prisoners of conscience and their families.

In February 2017 the plain-clothed police abducted him; he was violently beaten, stripped, and tied up. The police agents deliberately severed two tendons on his right leg and left him naked beside a mountain road in a remote area of Ha Tinh Province. He had to undergo surgery. While he was still under recovery, on July 30, 2017 the police arrested him at his home in Thanh Hoa Province. On April 5, 2018 he was sentenced to 12 years in prison for “carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the government” in the same case as Nguyen Bac Truyen and 4 members of Brotherhood for Democracy: human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai and his assistant Le Thu Ha, Pham Van Troi and Truong Minh Duc. His sentence was upheld at an appeal court on June 4, 2018.

Currently imprisoned in Gia Trung prison in Gia Lai Province, about 1,000 km from his home, Pastor Ton’s health has deteriorated significantly of late due to the lasting consequence of the injuries inflicted upon him in early 2017. His wife’s appeal to the prison authority for proper medical treatment for him has fallen on deaf ears.

(5) Phan Van Thu (m)



He is the founder and leader of An Dan Dai Dao, a Buddhist sect founded in 1969 but outlawed after the Communists took over South Vietnam in April 1975. The new regime falsely accused sect members of working for the CIA, confiscated all 12 temples that belonged to the sect, and arrested its entire leadership. During interrogation sect leaders were brutally tortured – one of them died as a result. They were all sentenced to long prison terms. Mr. Thu was released in 1983 and placed under 5 years of probation.

In 2003, a group of sect leaders and members established an eco-tourist company at the Da Bia Tourist Resort in Phu Yen Province. It also served as spiritual center for the sect,

substituting for the temples that had been confiscated by the government. The company signed a contract with the local authorities to engage in protecting the forest and environment.

As the project neared completion, the government arrested Mr. Thu and 21 sect members in February 2012. They were charged with subversion and falsely accused of writing documents critical of the government, using the eco-tourism park as a cover for recruiting supporters. They were sentenced under Article 79 of the 1999 Penal Code, "plotting to overthrow the government," by the People's Court of Phu Yen Province in January 2013. Mr. Thu received the harshest sentence: life in prison.

Aside from wiping out an entire religious sect, the provincial government seized the eco-tourism park built and financed by the victims and other An Dan Dai Dao adherents, including some U.S. and Australian citizens.

Currently incarcerated in Gia Trung Prison, Gia Lai Province, Mr. Thu suffers from diabetes, arthritis, hypertension, and heart failure. His family has repeatedly requested his release or the temporary suspension of the sentence to allow him to obtain better treatment outside of the prison, but to no avail.

(6) Do Thi Hong (f)



She was arrested on February 14, 2012 along with 21 other fellow members of the An Dan Dai Dao Sect. They were all charged and convicted under Article 79 of the Penal Code "Plotting to overthrow the government." She was sentenced to 13 years in prison, followed by a five-year probation period. She is detained in Binh Phuoc prison and reported to be in poor health.

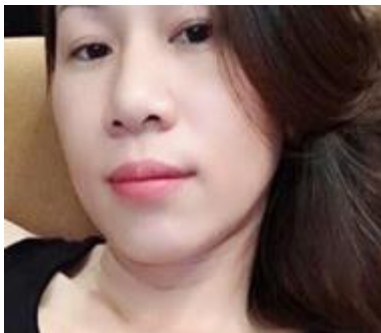
(7) Hoang Duc Binh (a.k.a. Hoang Binh) (m)



He is the vice-president of the Viet Labor Movement, and a well-known blogger who covered news on the environmental disaster in the central coastal provinces of Vietnam caused by the Taiwan-owned Formosa Steel Plant in 2016.

On Monday 15 May 2017, Mr. Binh was travelling in a car with Catholic priest Nguyen Dinh Thuc from the Song Ngoc parish in Dien Chau district to Vinh city. Their car was stopped in Dien Chau district and Mr. Binh was violently removed from the car by the police. According to the arrest order, Mr. Binh would face charges of "resisting persons in the performance of their official duties" under Article 257 and "Abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State, the legitimate rights and interests of organizations and/or citizens" under Article 258 of the 1999 Penal Code, "abusing democratic freedoms." On February 6, 2018 he was sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment: seven years for each charge. On April 24, 2018, his appeal was denied by the People's Court in Nghe An Province.

(8) Doan Thi Hong (f)



She is member of the Constitution Group (Nhóm Hiến Pháp), which aims to promote people's understanding of human rights provisions in Vietnam's 2013 Constitution. The group's main activity was to distribute copies of Vietnam's Constitution to Vietnamese citizens.

Following her participation in a peaceful protest in June 2018, Doan Thi Hong was arbitrarily arrested on September 2, 2018 in HCMC. Charged with "undermining national security" under

Article 118 of the 2015 Penal Code, she has been detained without trial for more than a year at the Police Detention Center in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). At that time, Doan Ngoc Ha Vy, Hong's daughter, was just 30 months old. She was supposed to face trial on January 14, 2020 but the trial was postponed.

Three members of the Constitution Group have been sentenced to 2, 5.5 and 8 years of imprisonment on charges of abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on national interests and of disseminating information to oppose the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Eight other group members, arrested in September 2018, are still being held in temporary detention without a trial date, in violation of Vietnam's own Criminal Procedure Code. Two group members have fled to Thailand and have been both recognized as refugees by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.