

Censorship and self-censorship at the ASEM 5 People's Forum in Hanoi

As civil society activists from Asia and Europe leave Vietnam after the closure of the **Fifth Asia-Europe (ASEM) People's Forum** held in Hanoi from 6-9 September 2004, many questions remain about Vietnam's organization of this event, which precedes the official ASEM Summit to be held on 8-9 October in Hanoi. Hailed by its organizers as an opportunity to *"enhance mutual understanding, solidarity and joint-actions for the common interests of our people,"* the Forum was marred by restrictions on information and participation imposed by the Vietnamese authorities and the Forum's Vietnamese organiser, the Vietnamese Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO).

On the very first day, VUFO announced that the international media was banned from attending the Forum. The ban included all the foreign journalists who had travelled to Hanoi specifically to cover the event, including ten Southeast Asian journalists invited by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a German-based organization promoting political dialogue within Vietnam. Associated Press and other international news agencies were also formally banned from attending the Forum's discussions, which included issues such as peace and security, economic and social security, democratisation and people's rights, and a specific workshop on "the media and democracy".

VUFO said the media had been excluded because there was *"no room to accommodate them"*. They promised to organize daily press briefings and hand out a list of participants so that journalists could request interviews. No lists were ever made available.

The media ban drew strong international protests. Thailand's daily newspaper **"The Nation"** said it was *"a step back from Vietnam's place on the global stage"*, one, which *"tarnished the country's image"*... *"Vietnam must learn how to cope with the realities of today's world. Over the past years, the Communist Party has benefited greatly from the positive tone of the coverage by the international media. But from a journalist's point of view, both the negative and the positive aspects of modern-day Vietnam must be included in the coverage to allow readers to form their own opinion. Hanoi's action will only have the opposite effect of what the country had in mind when it carried out the ban... In this age of globalisation, no country can expect to prevent the free flow of information from reaching its people..."* ([Editorial, 8 September 2004](#)).

In an interview with the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, **Lord Avebury**, Vice-Chairman of the **UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group** declared : *"Communist fear of the free media is alive and well in Hanoi. To stop journalists attending a meeting on media and democracy shows that the Vietnamese government doesn't*

fully understand what democracy means. I hope the EU will make it clear at the ASEM Summit that Europe's relations with the countries of the region will only be strengthened if we can agree on respect for the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, including freedom of expression".

Paulo Casaca, Member of the European Parliament (Socialist, Portugal) said, *"It is extraordinary that a Forum aimed especially at holding a public discussion is held behind closed doors. This shows that the Vietnamese authorities have a lot to hide, a lot of things that they don't want to be seen by the world at large, especially the very negative repression of peaceful religious movements. We are facing the repression of religious movements that are completely peaceful, that never threaten anyone, and only use the strength of their ideas. It is absolutely unacceptable that the Vietnamese State is repressing them the way they have been doing".*

Antoine Bernard, Executive Director of the Paris-based **International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH)** condemned the media ban as a *"shocking and regrettable decision, a flagrant violation of freedom of information. The excuse put forward to justify this decision - to reduce the number of participants because of lack of space - is obviously a fallacious pretext that fools no one. The masks have fallen. This ban (on the media) confirms overwhelmingly that the Vietnamese regime systematically and blatantly violates the fundamental freedoms of expression, opinion and association, and especially freedom of information".*

Following these protests, the Forum was opened to the media on the last day, and some foreign journalists were allowed to attend the workshops, but were expressly prohibited from reporting on the proceedings. *"They are sponsored by different organizations and are not allowed to work as journalists when participating in the forum, according to Vietnamese regulations,"* said Do Tuan Song of the Forum's organizing committee.

Not only journalists, but also a number of Asian NGOs were excluded from the Forum because of political pressure from their governments who were concerned to preventing activists from criticising their country's human rights record. A delegation of **10 Cambodians** invited by the London-based **One World Action** was intercepted and detained by Security Police at Ho Chi Minh City Airport and banned from participating in the Forum. **Phay Siphon**, former Senator and Chairman of the **Cambodia Centre for Human Rights** who headed the delegation, was intending to deliver a strong speech at the People's Forum criticizing State repression and the worsening human rights situation in Cambodia (Mr Siphon was expelled from the Senate because of his harsh criticisms of the Cambodian government). *"The Cambodian government has apparently negotiated with the Vietnamese government not to allow the Cambodian delegates to attend because it would be embarrassing to*

the Cambodian government”, said **Tom Crick**, Asia programme officer of **One World Action**. After negotiations, the Vietnamese foreign ministry allowed four of the Cambodians to attend the Forum, but they all decided to return to home in solidarity with their banned colleagues.

Two delegates from **Burma** who slipped through various channels to be able to attend the forum were told by the VUFO secretariat not to distribute campaign materials on democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Other pro-Burma supporters were forbidden to distribute materials for a signature campaign calling on the European Union to continue to block the entry of Burma’s military regime in the ASEM.

Ms **Ton Nu Thi Ninh**, vice-president of the National Assembly’s Committee on Foreign Relations, defended the government’s stance by stance by explaining that Vietnam’s one-party system was *“not on the fashionable side these days”*. *“But we must defend the right of minorities”*, she said ironically, alluding to the 2-million minority of Communist Party members in a population of 81 million Vietnamese. *“I claim the right for us to try that challenge and build democracy within a one-party system”*.

A rare insight into the People’s Forum was given by one of it’s key speakers, Ms **Deborah Stothard**, Coordinator of Southeast Asia-based **Altsean Burma - the Alternative Asean Network on Burma**, who addressed the Plenary session on “Democratisation and People’s Rights”. In an interview with **Penelope Faulkner**, Vice-President of the Vietnam Committee on Human on Human Rights, given directly from the Forum in Hanoi, Ms Stothard gave her impressions of the ASEM 5 People’s Forum and her first-time visit to Vietnam. Below is a transcript of the interview, which was broadcast to Vietnam on **Radio Free Asia** on 10 September (9.00 pm) and 11 September (6.30 am) 2004.

[Interview of Deborah Stothard](#)