

Human Rights Organizations urge French President to speak out for human rights during visit to Vietnam

PARIS 4 September 2016 (VCHR) – Three France-based human rights organizations, the FIDH, the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) and the French League for Human Rights (LDH) have sent an Open Letter to French President François Hollande on the eve of his visit to Vietnam (5th – 7th September 2016). On behalf of their organizations, **Dimitris Christopoulos** (FIDH President), **Vo Van Ai** (VCHR President) and **Françoise Dumont** (President, LDH) called upon the French President to raise urgent human rights issues in his discussions with the Vietnamese leadership, in particular the ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression, religion and peaceful assembly. They urged President Hollande to press Vietnam to cease political repression of human rights defenders, bloggers and government critics, and release all persons detained for the peaceful expression of their political opinions or religious beliefs.

OPEN LETTER

TO FRENCH PRESIDENT FRANÇOIS HOLLANDE ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN VIETNAM

The Hon. François Hollande
President of France
Palais de l'Élysée
Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré
75008 Paris
France

Paris, 2 September 2016

Dear Mr. President,

On the occasion of your upcoming visit to Vietnam from 5-7 September, FIDH and its member organizations, the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) and the French League for Human Rights (LDH), wish to convey their utmost concern over the serious and ongoing human rights violations in Vietnam.

Under the new administration, appointed by the Vietnamese Communist Party's 12th Congress in January 2016, the authorities have intensified acts of repression against government critics and members of civil society. Activists and human rights defenders have been regularly subjected to physical assault, surveillance, restrictions on their freedom of movement, and arbitrary arrest and detention. In the latest case indicative of this trend, in August 2016, authorities extended the pre-trial detention of human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai to 12 months. Dai was arbitrarily arrested in December 2015, on the eve of the EU-Vietnam human rights dialogue for giving training on human rights.

In addition, courts have continued to sentence activists and human rights defenders to prison terms for merely exercising their right to freedom of expression, such as prominent blogger Nguyen Huu Vinh, also known as Anh Ba Sam, condemned to five years in prison in March 2016.

Over the past four months, authorities have violently cracked down on a wave of nationwide peaceful protests organized in response to an unprecedented environmental disaster that caused massive fish deaths and seriously affected the livelihood of many communities in Vietnam's central provinces. In many cases, security forces severely beat and arbitrarily arrested scores of participants.

As a result of the ongoing repression of government critics, Vietnam has now the dubious distinction of holding the largest number of political prisoners among Southeast Asian countries. Vietnam currently has approximately 130 dissidents behind bars.

A particularly emblematic case is that of Thich Quang Do, the head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (an independent religious group arbitrarily banned since 1981), who is currently under house arrest in Ho Chi Minh City. Thich Quang Do, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, has been subjected to various forms of arbitrary detention for over 30 years.

We urge you to press Vietnam's leaders to order the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and to end all acts of harassment against activists and human rights defenders.

Existing legislation criminalizes the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and

expression, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and the right to freedom of religion or belief. Of particular concern are broadly-interpreted “national security” provisions in the Criminal Code that provide the legal means for the authorities’ relentless repression of dissent. These provisions, several of which make no distinction between acts of terrorism and expression of peaceful dissent, and prescribe the death penalty, are inconsistent with Vietnam’s international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Recent amendments to the Criminal Code, approved in November 2015, abolished the death penalty for seven crimes. However, 18 offenses still carry the death penalty. We urge you to call on Vietnam’s leaders to take urgent steps to abolish the death penalty for all crimes.

Another issue of concern is the draft Law on Belief and Religion that will be voted very soon. If adopted in its current form (draft dated 8 August 2016), this law will be a serious step backwards for freedom of religion and belief in Vietnam and would violate the country’s international obligations under Article 18 of the ICCPR. The proposed law would legalize state interference in religious life by introducing a draconian system of registration for religious groups. The draft law would exacerbate restrictions on members of “non-recognized” religious groups, who already suffer harassment and arbitrary arrest and detention.

We encourage you to raise the above-mentioned issues in your dialogue with President Tran Dai Quang and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and demand that the government respect, promote, and fulfill human rights principles in accordance with the country’s international obligations and the numerous recommendations made by various human rights mechanisms of the United Nations.

We hope that a message in support of independent civil society will resonate during your address at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi. As more Vietnamese, especially Vietnamese youth, make increasing demands for democratic reforms and respect for human rights and the rule of law, it is important to show that France stands with them.

‘Liberty, equality, and fraternity’ are not outdated concepts. These words convey fundamental values to which France must remain committed. France must promote these values in a country where severe obstacles to the full enjoyment of key civil and political rights still remain.

We thank you for your attention on this important matter.

Sincerely,

Quê Me

Quê Me: Action for democracy in Vietnam & Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

<http://queme.org/en>

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FIDH President

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Françoise Dumont

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