

## ***Vietnam Committee : Presentation by Vo Van Ai Hearing on Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam (European Parliament, Brussels, 25 August 2008)***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the European Parliament's Sub-Committee on Human Rights for inviting me to speak on the human rights situation in Vietnam, It is an especially timely opportunity, for this a crucial moment for our country's future.

Vietnam is undergoing a serious economic crisis. More than anything, the crisis marks the failure of Vietnam's policy of "doi moi" (renovation), or economic liberalization under authoritarian control. Under this policy, Vietnam treats its people both as source of cheap labour and an enemy of the regime.

Indeed, until recently, Vietnam was hailed as an economic miracle, one which could perhaps even overtake China. Its population is docile, industrious and low-paid; the government promises political stability and improved conditions for foreign investment.

But Vietnam's growth, which looked so good on paper, now make it look like a "paper tiger". In just a few months, the economy has plummeted.

Inflation hit 27% last July, by far the highest rate in Asia. The trade deficit reached US\$15 billion over the past 6 months, and is expected to skyrocket to US\$25 billion by the year's end.

The stock exchange has plunged 55% since late 2007, and fears of a possible devaluation of the Vietnamese currency (dongs) are surging. In July, the Asian Development Bank warned that Vietnam may be on the verge of "**financial disruption**" that could lead to the kind of meltdown suffered by Thailand in 1997, which triggered off a financial crisis throughout Asia.

The poor people of Vietnam are the worst hit by this crisis, facing a 44% rise in food costs, with a 72% rise in the cost of Vietnam's staple food, rice.

The Vietnamese government itself is expressing concern. In May, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung reported to the National Assembly that the number of families "going hungry" had doubled from last year. The Minister of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan told the National Assembly in May that "*currently around 13 million people are seriously affected by rising prices. That is not to mention*

*another 13 million poor people and tens of millions of others living near the poverty line, including ethnic minority people”.*

Hunger riots are brewing, thus threatening Vietnam’s ability to guarantee the sacrosanct principle of “political stability” - this magic word that justifies the State’s repression against its own people, and prompts it to stifle the people’s protests rather than seek solutions to their problems.

But Vietnam’s “political stability” is already under threat. More than 400 strikes have taken place over the past 6 months, compared with 500 during the whole of last year. The strikes involve tens of thousands of workers, who protest against poor working conditions and low wages. Contrary to what one might expect in a Socialist state, Vietnam is systematically taking the employers’ side, and penalizing the workers for their protests. Whilst the right to strike is guaranteed, the Labour Code prohibits strikes in 54 sectors considered to be of “public service” or important to the national economy or defence (including the post office, public transport, banking...). Indeed, it is difficult to fathom in which sectors strikes are permitted. Moreover, a new government decree obliges workers to pay their employers 3 months salary in compensation if they stage wildcat strikes that are deemed to violate the Labour Code.

Since Vietnam’s unique state-controlled labour union (Vietnam Confederation of Labour) defends the government rather than the workers, people have tried to form independent trade unions to promote worker rights. An unofficial United Worker-Farmers Organization (UWFO) set up in 2006 was immediately smashed by the government and its members condemned to harsh prison sentences in 2007.

Repression is also the government’s response to protests by farmers and peasants, who represent 75% of Vietnam’s workforce. Every day for the past 10 years, the “Victims of Injustice” (*Dân Oan*), a movement of farmers and peasants whose lands have been confiscated by the State, file complaints and stage peaceful protests outside government buildings in Hanoi and Saigon desperately hoping to meet officials who will solve their grievances. An estimated 10% of the population of Hanoi are dispossessed peasants, and over 2 million complaints are still waiting to be processed.

Following the comment made by the Secretary-general of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nong Duc Manh: *“it is abnormal for people to demonstrate with banners. Our democracy is in many ways excessive”*, Vietnam has subjected the “Victims of Injustice” to routine harassments and arrest. In 2005, the government adopted Decree 38 banning demonstrations outside public buildings.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Vietnam stifles all forms of peaceful protest, petitioning or dissent, it protects the ruling Communist Party minority and enables an elite of some 200 families of high-ranking Party cadres known as *“red capitalists”* to live in luxury and total impunity. Even top Party and military veterans such as General Vo Nguyen Giap, hero of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, denounce the powers of this unscrupulous elite, who *“buy positions, power, diplomas and degrees, buy off the winning tender for their commercial ventures, they even “buy” their way out of punishment and prison.”*

To ensure the ruling elite’s impunity, Vietnam muzzles the press. Journalists who uncovered the multi-million dollar “PMU-18” corruption scandal, which involved high-ranking officials, were arrested in May 2008, just two months after one of the top culprits, Vice-Minister of Transport Nguyen Viet Tien, was suddenly acquitted and released from prison. Seven other journalists who covered the affair had their press cards revoked. This corruption scandal reveals the extent of Vietnam’s increasing curbs on press freedom. A 1999 law requires journalists to pay damages to persons harmed by their articles, even if the reports are true. Decree 56 passed in July 2006 provides for crushing fines and suspension of licenses for media and journalists who defame and attack the “prestige of the state”.

In fact, the policies of Vietnam’s one-Party state are aimed at maintaining the power and privileges of the ruling minority, to the detriment of the people’s sustainable development. The suppression of human rights, controls and censorship of the Internet, the surveillance of the whole population by a tight network of “precinct security police” (*Cong an khu vuc*), the administrative detention or internment in psychiatric institutions of peaceful dissidents and critics, the broadly-defined “national security” laws – all these are tools used by the regime to stifle, control and repress the people of Vietnam.

Le case of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) is particularly striking. Adhered to by a large majority of Vietnam’s 84-million population, the UBCV has systematically refused to come under control of the Communist Party and join the “State-sponsored” Buddhist body set up in 1981. Resisting decades of totalitarian repression, today the UBCV is the largest civil society movement, and the driving force in the movement for democracy, religious freedom and human rights. As a result, its leaders and members are systematically harassed, interrogated and detained. In July 2008, the UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, 89, died under house arrest in Vietnam. He had spent 26 years in detention without trial. His successor, Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, is also under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon. He too has spent almost three decades in prison, internal exile or house arrest. The members of twenty local representative boards set up by the UBCV to bring humanitarian and spiritual aid to people in the poor provinces are subjected to routine harassments and arrests. UBCV monk Thich Tri Khai was expelled from his pagoda in

Lam Dong in May 2008 and has since disappeared without trace.

Instead of guaranteeing the people's exercise of the constitutional right to religious freedom, Vietnam seeks to "prove" it respects this right by organizing events such as the United Nations' Day of the Vesak (Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Passing away) in Hanoi in May 2008. The government makes these "cosmetic gestures" to enhance its image and attract foreign capital. It is a master in this art.

For many years, Vietnam has multiplied pledges of good-will to win foreign aid and investment, but has not ceded an inch of its totalitarian control over the population, nor made any move to respect of human rights and the rule of law. To attain sustainable development, Vietnam must attack these problems at the roots, and Western democracies should show more vigilance and less complicity with the regime.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 1995 EU-Vietnam Cooperation Agreement is currently being re-negotiated. It will be replaced by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. It is crucial that this Agreement includes Vietnam's commitment to respect human rights, and mechanisms by which the European Union can scrupulously monitor their implementation. Vietnam must cease oppressing its people. As a basic prerequisite, it should;

- allow independent civil society movements to participate in the process of sustainable development, notably by re-establishing the legal status of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam;
- release all prisoners of conscience, including the new UBCV Patriarch Thich Quang Do, lawyers Nguyen Van Dai, Le Thi Cong Nhan etc;
- lift all restrictions on freedom of expression and the press that contravene international law.

**Vo Van Ai**

President, Vietnam Committee on Human Rights  
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