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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[04 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Freedom of expression denied in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam

The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam controls all social and traditional media and tolerates no dissent. The freedom of expression in social and print/radio/TV media consistently has been denied. At least 19 bloggers and 10 other activists have been arrested for writing posts online. On September 23, 2019, the businessman Nguyen Duc Quoc Vuong was arrested for preparing and distributing information and documents by Facebook criticizing the government policy. He previously has been incarcerated in June 2018 for his opposition on Facebook against laws on cybersecurity and on special economic zones.

Every month, two or three Facebook users were arrested in 2020 for “abusing democratic freedoms” in social media. Very recently, on June 13 Nguyen Dang Thuong and Huynh Anh Koa were imprisoned for distributing critical information on Facebook. Nguyen had managed to organize an economic-political discussion group on social media of 46.000 followers. They are facing huge fines or imprisonment between nine months and five years.

The blogger Nguyen Tuong Thuy was taken into custody on May 20 for “making, storing and disseminating documents and materials for anti-state purposes”. He was former vice chairman of the Vietnam Independent Journalists Association and has written numerous commentaries on freedom of speech and civil rights in the web. The Facebook user Chung Hoang Chuong has been jailed in April 2020 to 18 months in prison because he shared a report on a deadly conflict of peasants with security officials in a land rights dispute.

In March 2020 a court sentenced the blogger Truong Duy Nhat to 10 years of imprisonment. He has been a contributor of Radio Free Asia’s Vietnamese service. His jailing internationally was criticized because before being arrested he was kidnapped in Thailand where he lived as a refugee. The new charge of an economic crime was filed after investigators were unable to find sufficient evidence to put him on trial. He had disappeared in January 2019 in Bangkok after complaining several times about harassment by Vietnamese security agents.

In November 2019 six bloggers were jailed for expressing their criticism in social media. Nguyen Dinh Khue, Ngo Xuan Thanh, Doan Viet Hoan and Vo Thuong Trung were sentenced to prison terms from 2.5 to three years for expressing dissent and plotting to set explosives. But no proofs for these state security accusations were presented in court. The Facebook user Pham Van Diep was sentenced to nine years imprisonment for criticizing the handling of a waste-crisis by the authorities. Nguyen Chi Vung was handed a six-year prison term on charges to disseminating anti-state criticism on Facebook.

Facebook has been very much criticized for bowing to Viet Nam’s censorship to remove posts when the website was often not usable by its 65 million users in the country after being taken offline by the authorities. Only after accepting to comply with the government’s requests, the website became fully operational once again. Facebook was accused to become complicit in violating the right to free speech.

Furthermore several dissident writers were arrested for expressing criticism against government policy. Tran Duc Thach, who often published on issues of human rights violations, corruption and injustice was taken into custody in April 2020. In October 2009, he was sentenced to three years in jail for publishing propaganda against the state. After his release, the authorities continued to harass him. A month later in May 2020, the dissident writer Pham Chi Thanh was taken into custody on charges of producing and distributing critical information. The publisher Phung Thuy was incarcerated on May 8, 2020, while he was delivering books to different bookshops. In custody, he was beaten by police officers. Later he was released from arrest.

At least 249 political prisoners are still held in the prisons, among them 230 prisoners of conscience who have been convicted, mostly for “undermining the national unity”, “propaganda against the state”, “subversion” or “disruption of security”. Some 19 other persons are held in pre-trial detention. Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) is especially alarmed that 66 of these prisoners of conscience are of ethnic minority descent. The biggest group among them are the Montagnards who account for 58 persons. Six prisoners are Hmong people and two belong to the Khmer Krom minority. Vietnam’s 53 ethnic minority groups account for 14 percent of the country’s total population. But among the prisoners of conscience they account for 28 percent of all political prisoners. Ethnic minority people are suffering most under the persisting human rights crisis. They mostly are convicted for undermining “national unity”.

Many of the ethnic minority people are suffering from a double persecution. They are jailed for their commitment for indigenous rights and for their Christian or indigenous faith. Many are Degar protestants, not officially recognized by the authorities. In March 2020, the two Hmong ethnic minority men Lau A Lenh and Sung A Sinh were sentenced to

life in prison for attempting “to overthrow the state” and establish a separate Hmong state in northwestern Vietnam. A dozen of other Hmong men were sentenced as alleged accomplices to jail terms between two and 20 years. For a long time, Hmong people have been calling for greater autonomy, more freedom, religious rights and the respect of their land rights. The authorities have been reacting with a brutal campaign of persecution leading to the criminalization of all demands for more rights by ethnic Hmong. Furthermore, they have been arresting Hmong people who have converted to Christian faith. The forced conversion from Protestantism to Animism, intimidation and arrest due to Christian faith and the obstruction of religious ceremonies by Protestant house churches of ethnic minority people have created an atmosphere of religious persecution among Hmong and Montagnards ethnic minority people in Vietnam.

Political prisoners are complaining about mistreatment in the prisons. Rights of prisoners according to the basic standards of treatment of prisoners are denied, such as the right to regular meetings with family members or the right to receive medicine and food from the relatives. Often, they are sent in prisons far from their families to break them mentally. Or they were forced to work hard without the necessary protective equipment. The prisoners are one of the most vulnerable groups to Coronavirus infection as the severe prison conditions have weakened their immune system. Their conditions are poor: being held in large numbers in small unhygienic cells without windows, lack of proper medical services, low-quality food and abuse and beatings by prison guards or other inmates have worsened their conditions. Political prisoners are often punished by their guards and put into solitary confinement. STP is very much concerned about the health conditions of Nguyen Viet Dung and Phan Kim Khanh, currently serving prison terms in the province Ha Nam for disseminating “anti-state propaganda”, after they were put on solitary confinement in 2020. Despite the potential risks of widespread infections, the authorities have ignored all appeals to release the political prisoners to avoid widespread COVID-19 infections among them.

Jail terms of political prisoners are suspended only in cases of severe health problems. STP is acknowledging that the 72-year-old Ngo Hao had his jail term suspended in January 2020 because he had high blood pressure and poor vision. After his arrest in 2013 he was sentenced to 15 years for “acting against the government”.

Furthermore, ethnic minority people very often are economically and socially marginalized. They account for 73 percent of the poor people according to statistics of the World Bank. The incomes of rural minority people rose much slower than for the Kinh majority population. Prejudices of “backwardness” or “underdevelopment” are widespread and indicators of racism against ethnic minority people.

STP is very much concerned about increasing land rights conflicts in ethnic minority areas. In May 2020, Vietnamese Police has clashed with 100 Khmer Krom farmers in the Mekong Delta. At least ten farmers were injured in the brutal crackdown in Kien Giang’s province Phu My district. The Khmer Krom, an ethnic Cambodian minority living in Vietnam, are suffering from a long-lasting repression incited by economic interests in the Delta and by an assimilation campaign ignoring their faith and strengthening religious repression. Khmer Krom are facing serious restrictions of their freedom of movement, association and freedom of expression in Vietnam.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam to:

- guarantee freedom of expression,
- release all political prisoners,
- respect religious freedom and to reform its Law on Belief and Religion and to end its campaign of restricting religious belief among ethnic minority people,
- stop assimilating ethnic minority people and to ensure their rights.