



FIGHTING FOR A GREENER FUTURE

**Environmental activists
and movements in Vietnam**

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2021, the Vietnamese government has imprisoned six key leaders of the country's climate change movement.¹ However, these jailed activists are far from the only environmental activists who have been targeted by the Vietnamese government in the past decade.

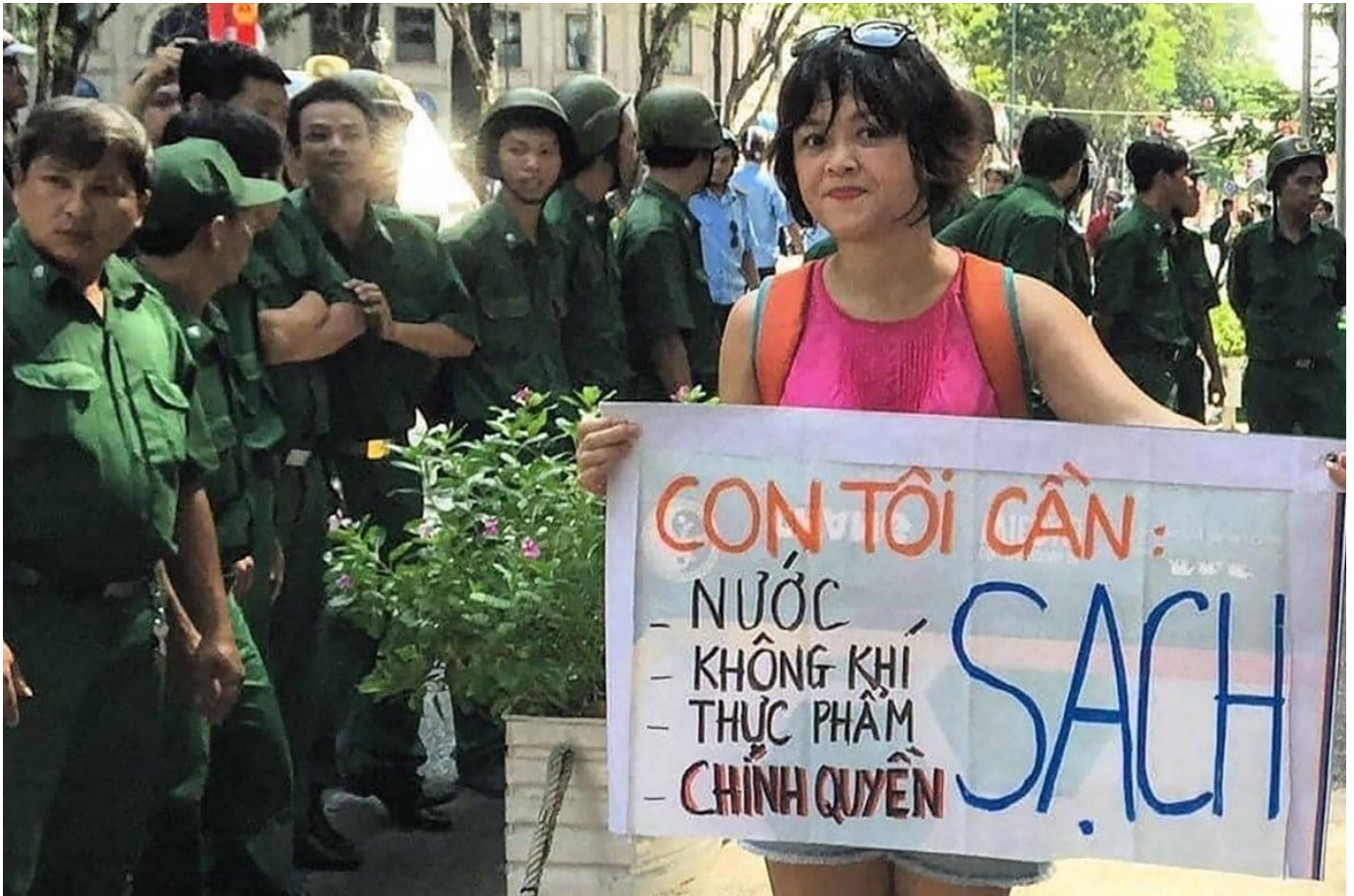
In 2015, the government began arresting environmental activists for their participation in environmental movements.² Other activists have had warrants issued for their arrest and were forced to go underground or flee the country.³ Many have experienced violence and harassment from agents of the state.⁴ In addition, the Vietnamese authorities have restricted news coverage of demonstrations and severely punished journalists and bloggers who reported on environmental disasters and protests.

Like climate activists today, these earlier figures dedicated themselves to protecting the environment. And like those today, Vietnam's forgotten environmental activists worked to improve the lives of their fellow citizens. Indeed, many view the climate activists as fellow travelers in an evolving environmental movement.

And yet this earlier generation of activists has been largely excluded from discussions about the crackdown on environmental activists in Vietnam. The repression they have endured, however, is not consigned to the past. Several are still imprisoned, and even more continue to experience significant harassment. Nevertheless, most of these individuals have faded from public view.

Instead, media and advocacy campaigns have focused on the small, elite group of climate activists who were more recently imprisoned. Through our conversations with journalists and international advocacy organizations, Project88 has observed that the climate activists, due to their non-confrontational approach, tend to be viewed as more deserving of sympathy. But Vietnam's forgotten environmental defenders are equally deserving of support and advocacy. They have fought to promote human rights using peaceful means, they fit the UN's definition of environmental human rights defenders,

and they have been persecuted because of their work.⁵ In each case, these individuals devoted their lives to protect and promote human rights at great personal cost.



Hoang Thi Minh Hong at a Formosa protest in 2016.⁶

This report provides an overview of the different environmental movements in Vietnam over the past decade, of the people involved in these movements, and of the government repression meted out against them. Interspersed throughout the report are personal narratives in which activists themselves outline their motivations, their advocacy work, and what they endured at the hands of Vietnamese authorities. By telling their stories, we attempt to place the recent arrests of the heads of climate NGOs into the broader context of environmental movements.

The report has several limitations. We did not interview a representative sample of Vietnamese activists, and much of the analysis is based on secondary sources. Nevertheless, we hope that the report will help to dismantle notions of “deserving” and “undeserving” victims, while promoting solidarity with Vietnam’s forgotten environmental activists.

6,700 TREES: AN ORGANIC UPRISING

In March 2015, the Hanoi government announced that it would cut down 6,700 trees in the city.⁷ This announcement was met with large-scale protests. Though police initially confronted the protesters, the demonstrations, which sprung up spontaneously across the city, were able to take place.⁸

The movement began as an organic citizen movement but over time, some local NGOs joined the protests and worked directly alongside independent protesters.⁹ Before this, local NGOs had generally been hesitant to work directly with independent activists for fear of government reprisal.¹⁰

The protests—coupled with outrage on social media—prompted local authorities to drop the plan.¹¹ One organization that rose to prominence as part of this movement was Green Trees, a civil society organization that works to protect the environment and ensure government transparency and accountability with regards to environmental issues. Green Trees organized environmental education programs, engaged in advocacy, and supported the implementation of UN human rights conventions. In 2016, the group helped to organize protests against Hung Nghiep Formosa Ha Tinh, Ltd. (Formosa Steel).¹²

The 6,700 trees movement provided activists with experience mobilizing citizens for environmental causes—experience that made the later Formosa protest movement possible. Many of those protests were led by the some of the same activists who worked together on the 6,700 trees movement. During the Formosa protest movement, urban environmental activists, including those working for Green Trees, drew from their experience resisting plans to cut down Hanoi's trees.¹³

BACH HONG QUYEN



Bach Hong Quyen at a Formosa protest¹⁴

In Vietnam, the environment is political. The air is polluted, and our children's future is in jeopardy. That's the reason I joined the environmental movement.'

Bach Hong Quyen was born in Hanoi into a family of activists and, as a child, witnessed members of his family endure persecution merely for practicing their religion. These formative experiences had a profound impact on him, and, as a result, Quyen dedicated his life to the fight against oppression.

In January 2012, he was imprisoned for a year. Quyen was convicted of illegal gambling. However, he told Project88 that while under interrogation, he was not asked once about his alleged gambling, and instead was asked only about his activism.

After he was released from prison, Quyen became a member of Green Trees, a grassroots environmental organization, and participated in the 6,700 trees movement in Hanoi. At those protests, he witnessed police beat fellow activists.

The following year, Quyen helped organize protests against Formosa Steel with Hoang Duc Binh, who is currently serving a 14-year prison sentence. Many of the most vocal protesters were arrested. Quyen managed to evade arrest, but afterwards he found himself under constant surveillance.

On May 12, 2017, the Vietnamese authorities issued a warrant for Quyen's arrest.¹⁵ He was accused of causing public disorder by organizing a demonstration in Nghe An on April 3, 2017.¹⁶

Quyen fled to Thailand. However, after he learned of the abduction and forcible return to Vietnam of Truong Duy Nhat, a blogger who also fled to Thailand, he realized he was not safe there.¹⁷ On May 2, 2019, he was relocated to Canada, where he now lives in exile.¹⁸

THE FORMOSA PROTESTS: A NATIONWIDE MOVEMENT

In April 2016, Formosa Steel, a subsidiary of Taiwanese conglomerate Formosa Plastics Group, discharged toxic chemical waste into the South China Sea.¹⁹ On April 6, sea life began washing up on shore near the Formosa Steel plant.²⁰ Within weeks, more than 200 km of coastline had been contaminated across five provinces—Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Tri, Quang Binh, and Thua Thien-Hue.²¹

The Formosa environmental disaster had a devastating impact on the region. The toxic spill killed an estimated 300 tons of fish and left fishermen jobless.²² In the immediate vicinity of the fish die-off, people suffered a loss of income and the threat of unemployment due to the collapse of the fishing and tourism industries.²³ In July 2016, the Vietnamese government found that due to the Formosa disaster the livelihoods of more than 200,000 people, including 41,000 fishermen, had been affected.²⁴

According to the Vietnamese government, by June 2017, nearly 18,000 people in the affected provinces had moved abroad to find work because of the Formosa disaster.²⁵ Oftentimes, those who left the country did so through harrowing means. Most of the 39 Vietnamese people found dead in a refrigerated truck outside London in 2019, for instance, were from Nghe An, Ha Tinh, and Quang Binh—three provinces that had been directly affected by the disaster.²⁶

In addition, the food supply in the region was tainted, and people there suffered from food poisoning and other detrimental health effects.²⁷ Due to the disaster, there were major concerns about food safety across Vietnam.²⁸

The Vietnamese government was initially reluctant to hold Formosa Steel responsible for the disaster and was slow to demand that the company provide compensation for economic and environmental losses. At first, the government claimed that there was no evidence linking Formosa Steel to the fish die-off.²⁹ On April 27, 2016, for instance, Vo Tuan Nhan, deputy minister of Natural Resources and the Environment, blamed the mass fish death on a red tide rather than pollution.³⁰

It was not until June 30, nearly three months after the die-off, and only after an immense public outcry, that the government finally acknowledged that pollution from the Formosa plant was in fact responsible for the disaster.³¹ On June 30, 2016, Formosa Steel admitted that they were responsible for the toxic spill and offered \$500 million as compensation for the economic and environmental damage.³²

The \$500 million was viewed by many in Vietnam as insufficient to compensate for the breadth of the damage.³³ According to a group of UN experts, this settlement amounted to roughly \$130 per affected household, which was inadequate compensation for the hardships experienced by the victims.³⁴ Moreover, while the government promised that distribute this money by August 2016, this process took much longer than that and there were allegations of corruption.³⁵ As of 2024, eight years after the disaster, it has been reported that many people are still waiting for their share of the compensation.³⁶

In the weeks and months following the Formosa disaster, as well as the government's lackluster response to the incident, large-scale protests and rallies began in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as in the affected provinces in central Vietnam.³⁷ Protests initially were organized over social media after a Formosa Steel representative said, 'It's either fish and shrimp or steel factories.'³⁸ 'I choose fish' and 'I choose fish and shrimp' became rallying cries.³⁹



Photo taken by Le The Thang. On the left, the sign reads, 'I choose fish and shrimp'.⁴⁰

In areas most affected by the fish die-off, the protests occurred well into 2018—these later protests focused on compensation for those directly affected by the economic and environmental impact of the disaster.⁴¹

MOTIVATIONS

Activists involved in the Formosa protests cited several motivations that inspired the movement. First, protesters were motivated out of a desire to protect the environment. People were protesting the destruction of hundreds of kilometers of coastline and advocating for policies that would prevent future environmental degradation.

Second, the protesters fought to ensure that those who suffered direct losses from the disaster were compensated. Many people have still not received any compensation from Formosa Steel or the government, and many of those who did eventually receive compensation did not get anything until years after it was promised.

Third, the lack of government transparency provided a motivating factor for the protests.⁴² Even years after the incident, the Vietnamese government still has not released much information about the environmental impact of the disaster.⁴³ With no genuine ability to participate in the political process, people saw protests and demonstrations as the only avenue to have their voices heard.⁴⁴ With all grievance mechanisms exhausted, the protest movement was the only way to advocate for transparency and accountability.

Finally, the protests were motivated by anti-Chinese sentiment. Though Formosa Steel is a Taiwanese company, the fear of growing Chinese influence over Vietnam animated many protesters.⁴⁵ The Formosa steel plant was viewed by many Vietnamese people as a symbol of China's economic influence within Vietnam, and the Formosa disaster occurred at a time when China was aggressively pursuing its claims to islands in the South China Sea, which have been claimed by Vietnam as well.⁴⁶

STRATEGY

The protest movement was mobilized separately in rural and urban areas. In cities, environmental activists utilized social media to build the movement.⁴⁷ Facebook was the primary platform used to communicate information about the environmental disaster and the ongoing protests.⁴⁸

Because of this, in May 2016, the Vietnamese government blocked access to Facebook on days immediately before, during, and after large demonstrations.⁴⁹ However, activists were able to bypass this block using VPNs and they were therefore still able to utilize the platform to help spread information and coordinate the protest movement.⁵⁰

In the rural coastal provinces, local Catholic priests helped to mobilize the protests and bring international attention to the issue.⁵¹ Churches provided a space to organize protests and prepare lawsuits against Formosa Steel.⁵²

The Vietnamese government claimed that these activists were only protesting due to 'foreign influence' and were helping to carry out a 'foreign agenda'.⁵³ To deflect accusations of undue foreign influence, environmental activists who worked for NGOs made efforts to separate their involvement in the protest movement from their professional work. Activists who worked for NGOs made clear that their participation in the protests was in an individual capacity, and that they were not professional agitators paid to stir dissent against the government.⁵⁴

ANH (PSEUDONYM)

'We have helped increase public awareness about environmental causes. I believe the time will come when the Vietnamese people stand together for our rights.'

In 2015, Anh joined the 6,700 trees movement. During these protests, he co-founded Green Trees, a grassroots organization that works to protect the environment and ensure government transparency and accountability. In 2016, Anh participated in the Formosa protest movement, joining advocacy campaigns and organizing protests in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Working closely with local Catholic priests, he also helped organize protests in central Vietnam.

Anh told Project88 that because of these protests, he faced government repression. While interviewing fishermen in Nghe An Province, Anh and other environmental activists were beaten by police. In 2018, he returned to Ha Tinh to conduct interviews, but, out of fear, nobody was willing to talk to him.

While working with Green Trees, Anh helped produce "Don't be Afraid," a film on the Formosa incident. While filming, Anh and other team members were harassed by the police. After the movie was released, police placed all members of Green Trees under strict surveillance. Police entered Anh's house while he was sleeping and detained him. However, Vietnam was negotiating the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement at the time of his arrest, and Anh was released after the German Embassy reportedly intervened.

In recent years, Anh has been forced into hiding. He was warned that his arrest was imminent, and so he fled his home and is currently on the run. Police have questioned people about his whereabouts, but, thus far, he has evaded arrest.

SAVE TAM DAO: A GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE FOREST

There have been several environmental campaigns since the Formosa incident. In 2019, for example, the *Save Tam Dao* campaign emerged in response to a plan to build an “eco-tourism” area in Tam Dao National Park.⁵⁵

Save Tam Dao activists worked to educate people about environmental protection and the importance of protecting Vietnam’s forests. The campaign was founded on the belief that the Vietnamese people have the right to know and decide how the country’s forests are used.⁵⁶

In March 2019, environmental activists reported that forest rangers threatened to arrest them when they approached construction areas.⁵⁷ The next month, another group of activists reported that they were detained, beaten, and robbed when they entered the park.⁵⁸ Quang (pseudonym), an activist involved in the campaign, recounted to Project88 that at one point, he was tied to a tree and left there until someone found him. He believes that the people who tied him up were state agents attempting to intimidate him.

The experience of the *Save Tam Dao* campaigners, as well as the recent imprisonment of the heads of climate NGOs, has made clear that the Vietnamese authorities will no longer tolerate environmental activism that challenges state policy and power.

FATHER ANTON DANG HUU NAM



Father Anton Dang Huu Nam⁵⁹

'Because I follow in the footsteps of God, I must stand against injustice. I have no desire to overthrow the government. I just want the government to respect the rights of the people.'

Father Anton Dang Huu Nam is a former priest who, due to his involvement in the protest movement, was suspended from administering pastoral duties. As a result of his activism, government authorities pressured his superiors within the Catholic Church to suspend him, Nam told Project88.

Nam's activism is rooted in his religious beliefs. In 1999, he left his job in the government to become a monk out of a strong desire to help people. In 2008, he became a parish priest. In that role, he educated people about their rights and became an outspoken advocate against government corruption.

In 2016, soon after the Formosa disaster, Nam was one of the first to speak out against the environmental degradation and the government's response. He helped organize large protests, most of which had thousands of attendees. In addition, Nam documented evidence of environmental harm and helped prepare legal documents to help people bring lawsuits against Formosa Steel.

Nam told Project88 that, due to his involvement in the protest movement, he has experienced harassment. People he worked closely with were imprisoned, and he himself has been detained many times.

Nam also told Project88 that he has been threatened and has received death threats. He is not sure who the death threats have come from, but he suspects they were from state agents.

When asked about the arrests of climate activists, the former Catholic priest said he believes the climate activists are part of the larger environmental movement. All were fighting for environmental causes and imprisoned as a result.

NET-ZERO NOW: ADVOCATING FOR CLIMATE ACTION

The repression of environmental activists in Vietnam continues to this day. In a shift from earlier trends, the government has begun to target the heads of NGOs and energy policy think tanks, in addition to anti-state activists. Since 2021, the government has jailed six key leaders of the country's climate change movement. Nguy Thi Khanh, Dang Dinh Bach, Mai Phan Loi, Bach Hung Duong, and Hoang Thi Minh Hong were all imprisoned on false tax evasion charges.⁶⁰ In addition, Ngo Thi To Nhien, the head of an energy policy think tank, was imprisoned for allegedly misappropriating government documents.⁶¹

These civil society leaders were imprisoned after engaging in intense activism to reduce Vietnam's reliance on coal. Many of their organizations collaborated as members of the Vietnam Sustainable Energy Alliance (VSEA), an advocacy coalition that was particularly active on energy and environmental policy. Together, they successfully campaigned for the government to commit to decarbonizing the economy, culminating in the announcement of Net Zero by 2050 by Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh at COP26 in November 2021.⁶²

In September 2020, while the government was drafting the Eighth Power Development Plan (PDP8), which outlines a roadmap for how the country will meet its energy needs over the next decade, the VSEA published an open letter criticizing key elements of the plan. Bach, Khanh, and Loi also appeared on a talk show to discuss the views of civil society on the draft plan. Finally, the VSEA published an open letter criticizing the draft PDP8's over-reliance on coal as an energy source.⁶³ Even though these activists were willing to criticize government policy, none were anti-state or pro-democracy activists. In fact, several of them had worked directly with the UN and Vietnamese government on various environmental protection initiatives.⁶⁴

While these activists did not identify as anti-state, as documented in Project88's report, *Weaponizing the Law to Prosecute the Vietnam Four*, they did challenge state power.⁶⁵ Their efforts to shape energy policy brought them into conflict with the Communist

Party elite who wanted to maintain their monopoly on policymaking. The common thread in these cases is that all the individuals involved ran organizations that conducted policy advocacy, and all received foreign funding to carry out their work. The imprisonment of these activists is a clear message from the government that civil society advocacy on energy policy is now off limits.⁶⁶

HOANG THI MINH HONG



Climate activist Hoang Thi Minh Hong⁶⁷

Hong became inspired to protect the environment after she became the first Vietnamese person to travel to Antarctica in 1997. A decade later, she returned to Antarctica and saw first-hand the devastating impact of climate change.

Inspired by her trips, in 2013 Hong founded the Center of Hands-on Action and Networking for Growth and Environment (CHANGE), which she ran until it was forced to close after Hong was arrested.

CHANGE worked to educate the public about the harmful effects of coal and mobilize young Vietnamese people to act on environmental issues, including climate change, pollution, and the illegal wildlife trade. Under her guidance, CHANGE fought to stop the construction of coal-fired plants.

Hong was a rising star. In 2018, she was one of 12 international activists to receive a grant from the Obama Foundation Scholars Program at Columbia University. The next year, Forbes Magazine listed her among the 50 most influential Vietnamese women.

But Hong's success came at a cost. In 2016, she participated in the Formosa protests, and, as a result, police relentlessly harassed her and threatened to close CHANGE. Undeterred, Hong stuck to her values and continued to protect the environment.

In 2022, Hong reported that CHANGE was experiencing administrative harassment from the government, including irregular audits of her organization and inquiries about money laundering.

Vietnamese police arrested Hong on June 1, 2023. She was convicted on September 28, 2023 and sentenced to three years in prison. On September 21, 2024, she was released from prison but is still under strict surveillance.

GOVERNMENT REPRESSION

While Vietnam responded to the 6,700 trees movement with a mix of responsiveness and repression, the Formosa protest movement and subsequent environmental activism was crushed. Beginning in 2015, dozens of activists received harsh prison sentences for their role in environmental protest movements.⁶⁸ Others had warrants issued for their arrest and were forced to go underground or flee the country.⁶⁹

ARRESTS AND STATE VIOLENCE

At the protests, there were numerous reports of police brutality against protesters. Many who participated in the movement were the victims of violence by agents of the state.⁷⁰

For instance, on May 8, 2016, Vietnamese police brutally suppressed protests in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.⁷¹ In Ho Chi Minh City, protesters were beaten, and dozens were arrested and detained for several days.⁷² Police blamed the protest on Viet Tan, an organization designated as a terrorist group by the government.⁷³ In Hanoi, police herded demonstrators onto buses and detained them.⁷⁴ Nam (pseudonym), an activist interviewed by Project88, stated that on that day he observed the protests in Hanoi though did not demonstrate himself. Nevertheless, he was beaten and dragged onto one of the buses. Due to the beating, he was in pain for over a month afterwards. According to Nam, Hanoi police officers told those in detention that if they continued to protest, they would die in a “car accident”.

A few months later, in August 2016, more than 4,000 Catholic parishioners attempted to march to the administrative offices of Ky Anh Township to protest government inaction in the aftermath of the Formosa disaster.⁷⁵ The parishioners were assaulted by 200 police officers.⁷⁶

On October 2, 2016, a local Roman Catholic diocese organized a protest of approximately 10,000 people at the Formosa steel plant to demand that the company cease operations in Vietnam and provide additional compensation for victims of the disaster.⁷⁷ The protesters also demanded that the government take measures to ensure that a similar

disaster would not happen again in the future.⁷⁸ Again, riot police officers assaulted the protesters.⁷⁹

In April 2017, 100 protesters blocked Highway 1A in the town of Ky Anh. Afterwards, the government announced that those who participated in the protest would be prosecuted.⁸⁰ Vietnamese authorities warned that those participating in future gatherings in the area might ‘face fines, government re-education programs or jail terms’.⁸¹

In addition to the violence and arrests carried out against protesters, the Vietnamese authorities also restricted news coverage of the protests, and severely punished journalists who reported on the Formosa disaster and the protests that followed.

IMPRISONMENT OF ACTIVISTS AND JOURNALISTS

Due to their involvement in protest movements, numerous activists and journalists were sentenced to prison. Several are still imprisoned, and, among those who have been released, many have been forced into exile.

In June 2017, blogger Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, known by the name *Me Nam*, or *Mother Mushroom*, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for ‘conducting propaganda against the state.’⁸² Quynh had been outspoken about environmental issues in Vietnam for years, but the Formosa disaster brought increased scrutiny to her work.⁸³ Quynh was critical of the government’s mismanagement of the toxic spill on her blog, which led to her arrest.⁸⁴ In November 2017, one of Quynh’s lawyers was disbarred as a result of providing legal counsel to dissidents.⁸⁵ After serving two years of her sentence, Quynh was released into exile.⁸⁶

In 2018, Hoang Duc Binh, an activist who led several protests against the Vietnamese authorities for their handling of the Formosa disaster, was sentenced to 14 years in prison under Articles 257 and 258 of the 1999 Criminal Code—Vietnam’s criminal code was amended in 2015—for ‘opposing officers on duty’ and ‘abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the state’.⁸⁷ Binh livestreamed a protest by fishermen and commented that the fishermen were stopped and beaten by state agents.⁸⁸ At a protest calling for Binh’s release, which was attended by hundreds of

people, security personnel shut down the demonstration and, according to blogger Nguyen Huu Vinh, many protesters were beaten.⁸⁹ Binh is expected to remain imprisoned until 2031.⁹⁰ He has reported that while incarcerated he has been denied food and medication sent by his family.⁹¹

In 2019, Nguyen Ngoc Anh, an environmental activist and blogger, was sentenced to six years in prison, followed by five years under house arrest, for allegedly ‘making, storing, releasing, and circulating information and documents against the state.’⁹² Anh had taken part in the Formosa protests in 2016.⁹³ He was released from prison on August 30, 2024 but is still under strict surveillance.⁹⁴

In January 2021, Dinh Thi Thu Thuy, an aquaculture engineer and ecological activist, was convicted of spreading ‘propaganda against the state’ and was sentenced to seven years in prison. Thuy is well known for her work addressing environmental damage that resulted from poorly regulated foreign investment.⁹⁵ Thuy is not expected to be released from prison until 2027.⁹⁶

In addition, the government has imprisoned six leaders of the country’s climate change movement since 2021. Unable to claim that these NGO professionals were anti-state activists, the government weaponized the criminal code to imprison five of these individuals on false tax evasion charges.⁹⁷ Ngo Thi To Nhien, the head of an energy policy think tank, was imprisoned for allegedly misappropriating government documents.⁹⁸ At the time of her arrest, Nhien was working with the UN to accelerate Vietnam’s energy transition by reforming the state-owned energy sector.⁹⁹

The Vietnamese government uses many provisions of the criminal code to silence environmental activists and subvert their movements. In the case of activists and journalists active in earlier protest movements, the government employed national security charges against them. When these charges were not applicable, as in the case of these climate activists, the government nevertheless found other provisions of the criminal code with which to charge them. The exact charges that have been deployed against the activists is not relevant. What is relevant is that the government uses a variety of tools, including criminal law, to silence and persecute environmental activists.

NGUYEN VAN HOA



Nguyen Van Hoa before his arrest¹⁰⁰

'I am not an activist. I am just a person who hopes for a better future.'

Nguyen Van Hoa was living in Ha Tinh—the location of the Formosa disaster—when the toxic spill occurred. He gathered evidence in the aftermath of the disaster and reported on protests that were taking place. He attended many protests and livestreamed from several of the larger ones.¹⁰¹ He wanted everybody in Vietnam to understand what was happening.

Hoa told Project88 that because of this work, he was placed under surveillance and endured harassment. Once, police came to his sister's home at 2 a.m. and questioned her for hours. His sister had just given birth, and Hoa believes the timing of the event was intentionally designed to punish him and his family.

Hoa was arrested on January 11, 2017. He was placed into pre-trial detention, and his family was not informed of his arrest until he had been detained for nearly a month. Hoa alleges that he was not provided adequate food or bedding and was often beaten and interrogated. He was also forced by the police to testify against Le Dinh Luong, another activist involved in the protest movement. Hoa told Project88 that whenever he asked to speak to a lawyer, he was beaten and his family was threatened.

In November 2017, Hoa was sentenced to seven years in prison and three years of house arrest for 'making, storing, distributing or disseminating information, documents and items against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam'.¹⁰² He was not permitted to have a lawyer present at his trial.¹⁰³

According to the government, Hoa had attempted to incite protests over the government's handling of the Formosa disaster.¹⁰⁴ State authorities alleged that he had 'received money' from 'extremists and hostile forces' to 'defame the government'.¹⁰⁵

Hoa told Project88 that he undertook four hunger strikes while imprisoned, and he was put into solitary confinement and beaten.¹⁰⁶ On January 11, 2024, he was released.¹⁰⁷ To this day, however, Hoa is still under strict surveillance.

OTHER FORMS OF HARASSMENT

Arrests and violence tend to be used as a measure of last resort. Environmental activists more commonly face police summons, financial harassment, surveillance, and restrictions on their movement.

Some have had their livelihoods threatened due to their involvement in the Formosa protests. Nam (pseudonym) reported that police would come to his workplace pretending to be customers and ask his boss pointed questions about his advocacy, in an apparent attempt to get him fired. Likewise, Minh (pseudonym), who was also interviewed by Project88, stated that police would regularly show up at his place of business and intimidate customers. He owned a gym, and in 2016, police visited his landlord and demanded that he increase Minh's rent. In addition, police demanded his clients cancel their gym memberships. Before the Formosa incident, the gym had 200-300 members, but, afterwards, Minh had no customers at all and was forced to close his gym.

In addition, each of the activists interviewed by Project88 reported that they were placed under surveillance and followed by police. Nam stated that one police officer has surveilled him continuously for a decade. To this day, the police call him monthly to check in on him and still regularly summon him to the police station.

Many of the activists interviewed by Project88 also reported that they had their possessions confiscated by the police. After Nam was detained, police kept his cellphone, the money he had in his possession, his ID card, and his passport. While he was able to recover his ID card after two years, he never got his passport back. In the years he was without an ID card, Nam was not able to register for a SIM card, fly, travel domestically, apply for a job, receive medical treatment, or apply for new documents. Moreover, without his passport, Nam was prevented from studying abroad, even though he had been accepted in a graduate program.

The activists involved in the Formosa protests endured harsh treatment by the state. This treatment has continued to this day, long after the activists have stopped being

mentioned in international media reports and international organizations have ceased major advocacy efforts on their behalf.

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CAO VINH THINH



'Everyone should live a life that does not exceed their needs. We should live closer to nature and speak up to protect the environment and ourselves.'

Cao Vinh Thinh has always had an affinity for nature. She feels most free when she is out exploring the natural world and has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the environment.

In 2015, Thinh learned of the plan to cut down Hanoi's trees and joined the 6,700 tree protests. There, she met people who shared her values. Thinh was invited to join Green Trees, where she worked closely with [Pham Doan Trang](#) to bring attention to the impact of the Formosa disaster, as well as the government's inaction after the spill.

As a result of her activism, Thinh has experienced government harassment. For instance, she told Project88 that on days of protests she has been prevented from leaving her house. On one occasion, police even wrapped her door in barbed wire to prevent her from attending a protest.

On one occasion, after she attended a protest, she was detained. A police officer wrote a confession for her and demanded that she sign it, but she refused. After Thinkh was released, people insulted her on the street and accused her of being a reactionary.

In 2018, Green Trees organized an underground screening of “Don’t be Afraid”—their film about Formosa. A day or two after the screening, Thinkh was detained once again. Her phone and laptop were confiscated, and she was held without charge until after midnight.

In 2019, police confiscated Thinkh’s passport and have still not returned it, preventing her from leaving the country. In 2020, the landlords for her retail shops all canceled their leases with her. All three told her that the police had pressured them to do so, Thinkh told Project88.

Despite this harassment, Thinkh says she will never stop fighting to protect the environment.

EQUALLY DESERVING OF RESPECT

Since 2015, Vietnam has experienced a series of environmental movements, each building on the work of previous activists. In 2015, protests erupted in Hanoi due to the plan to cut down the city's trees. The next year, in response to the Formosa environmental disaster, a protest movement was launched by protesters active in the 6,700 trees movement. In more recent years, a group of elite energy policy activists—some of whom also participated in the Formosa protest movement—have attempted to mitigate the effects of climate change. As a result of their involvement in each of these movements, dozens of activists have been imprisoned.¹⁰⁸ Many others have experienced violence and harassment from agents of the state.¹⁰⁹

The arrest and imprisonment of the climate activists has been covered extensively by international media, and the NGO leaders have been the subject of international campaigns led by the largest human rights organizations in the world. These campaigns, however, largely ignore the earlier generation of activists.

While some of this difference can be explained by the timing of the arrests and increased international attention to the threat of climate change, that does not fully explain this phenomenon. Instead, Project88 has observed that some diplomats and international advocacy groups tend to express greater moral outrage at the imprisonment of the climate activists who did not challenge the legitimacy of one-party rule.

From a human rights perspective, it is morally irrelevant whether the activists were political dissidents advocating for democracy or reformers working within the system to implement policy reform. Members of registered and unregistered organizations are both entitled to the same protections under international law.¹¹⁰

Moreover, the line between the forgotten environmental activists and the recent climate activists is oftentimes blurred. Hoang Thi Minh Hong, one of the climate activists who was recently released from prison, participated in the Formosa protest movement.

And Dang Dinh Bach, a currently imprisoned climate activist who once viewed himself as a partner of the government, started a hunger strike on September 28, 2024, advocating for, among other things, the release of all political prisoners in Vietnam. The unfair treatment Bach endured after he was arrested politicized him, leading him to stage protests and hunger strikes alongside Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, Vietnam's most prominent political prisoner.¹¹¹

Vietnam's forgotten environmental activists are equally deserving of support and advocacy as the recent climate activists. Each were exercising rights protected by international law. Each fought to promote human rights through peaceful means. All have endured, and many continue to endure, repression. And all have dedicated their life to protecting and promoting human rights, often at great personal expense.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Advocacy organizations should campaign for the release of all environmental activists still in prison, including Hoang Duc Binh, Dinh Thi Thu Thuy, Pham Doan Trang, and Le Dinh Luong.
- Advocacy organizations should avoid perpetuating binaries of ‘deserving’ and ‘underserving’ victims. All activists discussed in this report have worked to improve the environment and all have done so through peaceful means protected under international law.
- Media outlets should link the recent arrests to the Vietnamese government’s history of imprisoning environmental activists.
- Advocacy organizations should include explicit demands for the government to cease its harassment of Nguyen Van Hoa and Nguyen Ngoc Anh, for the Catholic Church to cease its harassment of Father Anton Dang Huu Nam, and for the government to issue Cao Vinh Thinh a new passport and allow her to travel freely.

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