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Viet Nam: Bloggers' shameful jail sentences aim to stifle free speech

Harsh prison sentences handed down to three bloggers accused of spreading anti-state propaganda in Viet Nam after a trial which lasted only a few hours are nothing short of a shameful attempt to silence dissent in the country, Amnesty International said.

Nguyen Van Hai, known as Dieu Cay ("the peasant's pipe") was sentenced to 12 years in prison; former policewoman Ta Phong Tan to 10 years; and Phan Thanh Hai, known as AnhBaSaiGon, to four years.

"These shocking prison sentences confirm our worst fears – that the Vietnamese authorities have chosen to make an example of these bloggers, in an attempt to silence others," said Rupert Abbott, Amnesty International's Researcher on Viet Nam.

"The sentences reflect the dire and worsening situation of freedom of expression in Viet Nam", he said.

Nguyen Van Hai reportedly tried to make a statement to the court about the right to freedom of expression and his frustration at injustice and corruption in Viet Nam, before his microphone was cut off.

The three bloggers were sentenced under Article 88 of Viet Nam's Criminal Code for "conducting propaganda" against the state. In addition to their long prison terms, they will also have to spend between three and five years under house arrest after their release.

Several relatives and supporters - including Nguyen Van Hai's wife, Duong Thi Tan; Ta Phong Tan's sisters, Ta Khoi Phung and Ta Minh Tu; and human rights defenders Pham Ba Hai and Lu Thi Thu Trang - were arrested to prevent them attending the trial, and some were detained. Most were later released, although the whereabouts of Ta Phong Tan's two sisters is unknown.

"Amnesty International will be campaigning strongly for the release of the bloggers - who we consider to be Prisoners of Conscience - and we call on the Vietnamese authorities to guarantee the safety of the bloggers' families and friends", said Rupert Abbott.