

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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VIET NAM: STOP INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT OF INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING HOUSE

Vietnamese authorities must immediately end the escalating crackdown on an independent publishing house, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said today. As part of the crackdown, dozens of people have been harassed and intimidated by police across the country, and at least one person has reported torture and other ill-treatment in detention. The crackdown sends a disturbing message to people who want to freely exercise their right to freedom of expression and access information and ideas and is yet another sign of the authorities' intolerance of peaceful dissent.

Since early October, police have harassed and intimidated dozens of people connected to the Liberal Publishing House -- a local independent publisher that has produced books on public policy and political thought in Viet Nam -- in what appears to be a targeted campaign. The harassment has taken place in at least three major cities, including Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Hue, in addition to the provinces of Binh Duong, Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Phu Yen. The individuals who have been targeted are believed to have either bought or read books printed by the publisher, or to have worked for the publishing house.

According to information received by Amnesty International, individuals in those locations have been summoned to local police stations where they have been interrogated about books they bought from the publishing house. After questioning, most were pressured to sign statements promising that they would not buy books from the Liberal Publishing House again.

In one case, police detained and allegedly tortured a man in custody on October 15 in Ho Chi Minh City, allegedly to force him to confess to working for the publisher. Police detained him for more than 12 hours, during which time he was repeatedly beaten until his nose bled. Since being released he has gone into hiding, fearful of re-arrest.

In addition, on October 23-24, a man in Phu Yen province received two letters from the police summoning him to the local station for questioning about his receipt of "banned" books. After interrogating the man, police searched his house and confiscated books printed by the Liberal Publishing House. In early November, a man who occasionally works with the Liberal Publishing House went into hiding, fearing arrest, after police instructed his regular employer to inform them when he next came to the office.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have recently received further reports of house searches and book confiscations.

This crackdown has further exacerbated the prevailing climate of fear in Viet Nam, where the authorities severely restrict the right to freedom of expression, and where people face arrest and imprisonment simply for voicing their opinions.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch call on the Vietnamese authorities to immediately stop this campaign of intimidation and harassment and allow the Liberal Publishing House and those associated with it to exercise their right to freedom of expression. The authorities should further initiate a prompt, impartial, thorough independent and effective investigation into allegations of torture and other ill-treatment by the Ho Chi Minh City police. Suspected perpetrators should be brought to justice and the victims provided with reparation. Individuals who report police abuse -- and their families -- should be protected from reprisals.

Background

The Liberal Publishing House, which was established on 14 February 2019, publishes a range of non-fiction books written by Vietnamese authors on topics such as political science, public policy and other social issues, such as *Politics of a Police State*, *Non-Violent Resistance*, *Politics for the Common People*, *Life Behind Iron Bars*, and *A Handbook for Families of Prisoners*. Many of these books are considered sensitive by the government and their publication is effectively banned. The Vietnamese authorities generally censor publications that are perceived to conflict with government policy.

The Liberal Publishing House has been targeted in the past. Since the publishing house began operations, the police have launched several sting operations to try to arrest people working for it. The publishing house has also been subjected to online harassment. In February, its Facebook page was subjected to a cyber-troop attack which led to the closure of the account. In July, three different banks informed the publishing house that its bank accounts would be closed. No justification was given. Police forced shipping companies to provide names and addresses of buyers. Those who refuse to comply face frequent intimidation, harassment and intrusive surveillance. In November, the publishing house's newly launched website (<https://nhaxuatbantudo.com/>) was targeted by multiple cyberattacks.

Both Viet Nam's Constitution and international human rights law guarantee the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to receive and impart information and ideas. This includes accessing and reading information contained in books such as those printed by the Liberal Publishing House. Freely accessing such information and ideas is also an important aspect of the right to education.

So far in 2019, at least 16 individuals have been arrested solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression, and some have already been tried and sentenced to terms of imprisonment.