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### **Vietnam: Harsh sentences for Montagnards**

*(New York/London) Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International today criticized the Vietnamese government's use of closed trials to impose harsh prison terms on fourteen ethnic minority Montagnards from the Central Highlands of Vietnam.*

*On September 26, after one-day trials, the provincial People's Courts in Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces imposed six- to twelve-year sentences on fourteen ethnic Jarai and Ede men for their alleged role in mass protests in February 2001, when thousands of Montagnards held protest marches in provincial towns. The demonstrators called for religious freedom, an end to encroachment on their traditional lands, and the establishment of an autonomous zone.*

*The men were the first to be tried in connection with unrest in the highlands, where the situation continues to be tense. The police and military presence has been high and foreign media and international observers have largely been banned from the region. The only official coverage of the trials was an announcement of the verdicts after they had taken place, and no diplomats or foreign press were allowed to attend.*

*"The speed of the trials and the fact that the public had no advance notice gives real cause for concern that the defendants were denied basic protections, such as the right to legal counsel," said Joe Saunders, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "We are concerned these men were deprived of their fundamental right to a fair trial."*

*According to the official state press, defendants were charged with "destabilizing security" under Article 89 of the Vietnamese Criminal Code. They were accused of having formed a "reactionary organization" in order to establish an independent state and a separate religion in the Central Highlands. One defendant was also charged with illegal possession of military weapons. In addition, Bom Jana -- identified as the "mastermind" of the unrest -- was*

found to have chaired a founding ceremony of an "illegal organization" in September 2000.

"The right to a public hearing is one of the fundamental tenets of a fair trial," said Demelza Stubbings, Southeast Asia researcher for Amnesty International. "These trials may well represent another effort by the Vietnamese government to stifle freedom of expression, assembly and association among Vietnam's dissenting highland population."

Land conflicts have increasingly become a problem in the Central Highlands provinces of Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Kontum, and Lam Dong, which have been flooded by an influx of lowland Vietnamese and ethnic minorities from other parts of Vietnam since 1975. The Evangelical Protestantism followed by most of the indigenous highlanders is also suppressed by the government, which forbids minority Christians from gathering in churches and pressures them to renounce their faith.

Political trials in Viet Nam are routinely unfair, with defendants usually not permitted to call or question witnesses, and lawyers for the accused being allowed only to plead for clemency on their clients' behalf.

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For more information please call Human Rights Watch (New York): Joe Saunders +1 212 216 1207, (h) +1 718 398 8893 or Amnesty International (London): Demelza Stubbings +44 20 7413 5660. Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>