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Viet Nam: Falun Gong practitioners detained over meditation protest

The beating and arrest of at least 30 peaceful Falun Gong demonstrators yesterday outside the Chinese embassy in Hanoi is an unacceptable violation of freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today.

The demonstrators were protesting the trial and mistreatment of two local Falun Gong broadcasters, Vu Duc Trung and Le Van Thanh, who had worked for the movement's radio station The Sound of Hope. The trial of Vu and Le is due to take place on Thursday.

"The repression of these Falun Gong practitioners by the Vietnamese authorities is a violation of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly," said Donna Guest, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

"We should really question why the Vietnamese authorities are targeting the Falun Gong in this way."

According to Falun Gong sources, police first dumped dirty water on the protesters to encourage them to move on. When the demonstrators did not move, the demonstrators were reportedly beaten and kicked while being moved into police vehicles and taken away into detention. Falun Gong witnesses allege that the police focused on assaulting practitioners who had cameras.

The group were reportedly held first in a stadium, then distributed among several police detention centres in Hanoi. It is not clear if they have been charged.

"It is truly excessive to beat up and drag away protesters who are peacefully meditating on a sidewalk," said Donna Guest. "The Vietnamese police should either release the detainees or charge them with a recognisable criminal offence."

Vu and Le have been in custody for 17 months and are accused of broadcasting illegally into China. Falun Gong spokespeople allege that the Chinese authorities are pressuring Viet Nam to crack down on the group.

"The prosecution of these two Vietnamese nationals is part of the wider repression of the media in Viet Nam," said Donna Guest.

Falun Gong is a banned movement in China, where practitioners have been arbitrarily detained, held in psychiatric hospitals and in 're-education through labour' facilities, and sentenced to long prison terms.

Dozens of peaceful political critics and activists have been sentenced to long prison terms since Viet Nam began a crackdown on freedom of expression in October 2009. Critics of a Chinese-backed bauxite mine project have been among the targets.