
Vietnam: Government repression of Indigenous Peoples

The Vietnamese government responded brutally to peaceful demonstrations by Indigenous Peoples in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in April. Police used tear gas, electric truncheons and water cannons to prevent demonstrators from entering Buon Ma Thuot, the capital city of Dak Lak province. The police were helped by men armed with metal bars, shovels, and machetes. At least 10 people were killed and hundreds of people were wounded. Many people did not return to their villages after the protests and are still missing.

The Indigenous Peoples, collectively known as Montagnards in Vietnam's Central Highlands, are demanding religious freedom and the return of their ancestral land.

In the last decade hundreds of thousands of ethnic Vietnamese have moved to the Central Highlands, either on their own initiative or through state-sponsored transmigration programmes. The Montagnards have seen vast areas of their farmland, swiddens and forests converted to rubber, coffee and fast-growing tree plantations or flooded to make way for hydropower and irrigation dams.

In February 2001, Montagnards staged peaceful demonstrations in provincial capitals in the highlands. Vietnamese authorities brought in thousands of police and soldiers who violently broke up the protests.

Since then police have arrested hundreds of people, sometimes torturing them to extract confessions. Several hundred Montagnards have gone into hiding, living in camouflaged hideouts in forests or coffee plantations, in holes under people's houses or in mountain caves.

Many more tried to flee to safety in Cambodia but in 2002, under pressure from Vietnam, the Cambodian government closed refugee camps on the border with Vietnam. Cambodian security forces now deport any Montagnards who try to cross the border from Vietnam. They are forced back to Vietnam and on returning many have been beaten, detained or put in prison.

A total of 124 Montagnards have been imprisoned for periods of up to 13 years, charged with crimes like "destabilising security", "distributing propaganda", or "organising illegal migrations" of Montagnards to Cambodia.

The government has placed restrictions on travel in the Central Highlands, closing off the area to journalists and diplomats. Montagnards attempting to communicate with the outside world run the risk of arrest. Meetings of more than two people are banned, as is "Dega Protestantism", a form of Christianity which the government claims is linked to demands for separatism by the Montagnards.

New York-based Human Rights Watch reports that police have surrounded villages, farms and forests where they suspect that Montagnard activists or church leaders are hiding. In the process of searching for people, security forces have often beaten people and destroyed their homes.

To make matters worse, the government has plans for a series of hydropower dams in the Se San

and Sre Pok River basins, two tributaries of the Mekong River which flow from the Central Highlands into Cambodia.

The Yali Falls dam on the Se San River in Vietnam was completed in 1999. The dam has caused serious problems for downstream communities in Cambodia. Several people drowned in flash floods caused by sudden releases of water from the dam and poor water quality has caused skin rashes and stomach problems. Fisheries in the Se San River have declined dramatically.

If built, the proposed dams in the Se San and Sre Pok River basins would result in the eviction of at least 12,500 people, many of them Montagnards, and would worsen problems downstream.

In 2002, the consulting firms SWECO, Statkraft Engineering and Norplan completed stage 1 of a National Hydropower Plan Study in Vietnam, funded by the governments of Sweden and Norway.

Stage 1 of the study is full of the language of stakeholder consultation and participation. Yet the study proposes several dams for the Se San River, without any mention of government repression in the Central Highlands.

SWECO, Statkraft Engineering and Norplan's experts explain that "To promote development" in the Se San basin "the Government has launched programs for reforestation, hunger elimination and poverty reduction as well as development of infrastructure." The Vietnamese government's policies for the Se San basin are "aimed at improving the socio-economic development", they add.

The reality of the government's policies in the Central Highlands is starkly different.

A woman from the Ede indigenous group described to Human Rights Watch what happened to Montagnards near Ban Ma Thuot on 10 April 2004: "A thousand people tried to get away from the slaughter by the police and civilians. They were beating us with metal bars and sticks. People were bleeding from their throats, noses, mouths, and eyes. Those who tried to hide in the coffee plantation were caught, beaten and killed on the spot."

Of course, consultants from dam-building firms are unlikely to risk upsetting their clients in the Vietnamese government by mentioning anything unpleasant like repression, particularly when there is the possibility of winning future contracts. SWECO won a contract from Electricity of Vietnam to produce the technical design of the Se San 3 dam, after recommending that the dam should go ahead in stage 1 of the National Hydropower Plan Study.

To Human Rights Watch's Brad Adams it is clear that Vietnam is escalating its repression of the Montagnards. He calls on the UN and governments, such as Sweden and Norway, who are providing aid to Vietnam to "take a more active role in protesting and preventing such serious human rights violations."

Through their support to Vietnam's dam-building industry, which will lead to more evictions and the flooding of large areas of agricultural land, the governments of Sweden and Norway are helping to make a human rights crisis worse.

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