

Vietnamese bloggers jailed

A court in southern Vietnam on Monday jailed three bloggers for "anti-state propaganda", including one whose case has been raised by US President Barack Obama.

High-profile blogger Nguyen Van Hai, alias Dieu Cay, was sentenced to 12 years in prison and policewoman-turned-dissident Ta Phong Tan was given 10 years after a trial lasting just a few hours.

"Their crimes were especially serious with clear intention against the state," Court President Nguyen Phi Long said, adding that "they must be seriously punished".

Phan Thanh Hai, the only one of the trio to plead guilty, was handed a four-year term. All of the defendants will also have to serve between three and five years under house arrest after they complete their prison sentences.

"They abused the popularity of the Internet to post articles which undermined and blackened (Vietnam's) leaders, criticising the (Communist) party (and) destroying people's trust in the state," Long said.

Nguyen Van Hai, whose plight has been highlighted by Obama, and Tan had "caused disorder" in the court and so were not allowed to make closing statements, he added.

In a speech that was curtailed when the audio feed from the courtroom was cut off, Nguyen Van Hai said he had never been against the communist state.

"I just feel frustrated by injustice, corruption, dictatorship which does not represent the state but some individuals.

"According to Vietnamese laws, citizens have the right to freedom of speech and it is in accordance with international treaties to which Vietnam is party," he said before the sound was cut.

The bloggers were charged with conducting propaganda against the one-party communist state under Article 88 of the criminal code, which rights groups say is one of many "vaguely defined articles" used to prosecute dissidents.

The charges relate to political articles the bloggers posted on the banned Vietnamese website Free Journalists Club as well as their postings on their own blogs, denouncing corruption and injustice and criticising Hanoi's foreign policy.

Vietnam bans private media and all newspapers and television channels are state-run.

In May, Obama said "we must not forget (journalists) like blogger Dieu Cay, whose 2008 arrest coincided with a mass

crackdown on citizen journalism in Vietnam".

Rights groups including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have repeatedly called on the Vietnamese government to drop the charges and release the three bloggers immediately.

Reporters Without Borders ranked Vietnam 172 out of 179 countries in its 2011-2012 press freedom index and identified the authoritarian state as an enemy of the Internet because of systematic use of cyber-censorship.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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