

## **[Statement] Vietnam: Release environmental rights defender Dang Dinh Bach and drop all charges against him**

**(Bangkok/Jakarta, 9 March 2022)** – ‘The Government of Vietnam must immediately release environmental rights activist Dang Dinh Bach and unconditionally drop all charges against him,’ said the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) in a joint statement today.

‘We are deeply concerned with the repression and harassment faced by human rights advocates, journalists, and academics, amidst a closed civic space in the country. Bach’s case highlights a wider trend of defenders being targeted for their human rights and environmental rights work,’ said FORUM-ASIA.

A prominent environmental lawyer and long-time advocate of environmental rights, Bach is currently the director of the Law and Policy of Sustainable Development (LPSD), a human rights organisation advocating for the protection of environmental rights and communities through training and policy research.

On 27 June 2021, Bach and journalist Mai Phan Loi were arrested and slapped with tax evasion charges. Originally set for 90 days, Bach’s pre-trial detention was extended for an additional three months on 24 September 2021, and was sentenced to five years on January 24 this year under the Article 200 of the Vietnamese Civil Code of 2015.<sup>1</sup> Prior to his trial, Bach went on a hunger strike to protest the right to denied due process, unhindered family visits, and for ignoring his diet preference.

Bach’s work involves assisting victims of calamities, particularly those affected by global warming and mining activities, and conducting capacity-building programs among his fellow human rights defenders. He is a non-partisan human rights defender, who has openly supported the Vietnamese government’s efforts against the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, he has engaged in raising awareness on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the European Union and Vietnam. The recent convictions of Bach and Loi came as a result of their unwavering work on the FTA and its human rights implications in Vietnam.

‘In a country where fundamental freedoms barely exist, Vietnamese human rights defenders are at the receiving end of state-sponsored threats for their dissent and peaceful advocacy. The charges and detention of Bach, highlights a new trend – the repression of individuals who are not directly associated with pro-democracy activities, and who identify as non-partisan,’ said FORUM-ASIA.

FORUM-ASIA stated that this would have further repercussions for ordinary individuals and would only further hinder anyone’s ability to speak out.

Bach is only one of several activists currently held in detention in Vietnam. Journalist and human rights defender Pham Doan Trang, was arrested in October 2020 for violations of the 1999 and 2015 Penal Code

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/site/adboecdanti-corruptioninitiative/46817432.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://globalvoices.org/2021/07/16/july-arrests-mark-turn-for-the-worse-in-vietnam/>

of Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> She is also charged with violating Article 88 of the 2015 Civil Code and for allegedly “conducting anti-state propaganda.”<sup>4</sup>

FORUM-ASIA calls on the government to release all detained human rights defenders, drop all charges and refrain from further harassing defenders and activists. It further calls on the government of Vietnam to guarantee all detained human rights defenders have access to adequate and appropriate medical and legal services, including appropriate legal representation.

‘The Vietnamese government must ensure that civil society groups can meaningfully engage with the Vietnam Domestic Advisory Group of the EU-Vietnam FTA and desist from threatening against those who try to engage and ensure human rights standards of the FTA. Its dismal human rights record not only risks closing spaces for real dialogue; it also closes opportunities for the government to create a more responsive society for its people,’ said FORUM-ASIA.

#### **About FORUM-ASIA:**

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. [www.forum-asia.org](http://www.forum-asia.org)

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=36033>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/woman-human-rights-defender-pham-doan-trang-formally-charged>