

Land grabbing: Vietnam farmers get death, long jail terms for murder in deadly land row

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A Vietnam court sentenced one farmer to death and given multiple-year jail terms to two others this week for fatally shooting three employees of a company in a land dispute in October 2016.

The convicted farmers said they were only trying to protect their land plots from being forcefully seized by a company



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(Left to right) Dang Van Hien, Ninh Viet Binh and Ha Van Truong are seen at the court in Dak Nong Province, central Vietnam, on January 3, 2018. Photo: Tuoi Tre

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A prolonged conflict between Long Son Co. and a group of farmers who had planted crops on a piece of land already allocated to the company in Dak Nong Province turned violent, and ultimately deadly, on the morning of October 23, 2016.

As some of the Long Son Co. employees, ‘armed’ with shields and knives, rushed to the disputed land with a tractor to ‘level’ it, two farmers fought back with sports guns, eventually killing three of the ‘intruders’ on the spot, while injuring 13 others.

‘Unjustified verdicts’

Four farmers and two members of Long Son Co. involved in the deadly land row began standing trial on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, the Dak Nong People’s Court imposed capital punishment on Dang Van Hien, who is responsible for all the three deaths, while sentencing two other farmers, Ninh Viet Binh and Ha Van Truong, to 20 years and 12 years behind bars, respectively.

All of the three were convicted of murder.

Another farmer, Doan Van Dien, was given a nine-month jail term on charges of “concealing crimes” for helping Hien dodge police detention after his murder.

The court also sentenced Nghien Thien Xuan Suu, deputy director of Long Son Co., to six months of imprisonment, and his assistant, Pham Cong Thien, to four years behind bars for “destroying or deliberately damaging others’ assets.”

Suu and Thien were punished for instructing Long Son employees to seize the land in dispute by force.

Shortly after the court ended, local people expressed their disappointment and grief at the sentences given to the farmers, who they believe were only trying to protect their crops against the forced land grab.

Many angered locals filled the court’s yard and shouted curses and swears at Long Son, accusing the company of oppressing farmers.

People opposing the court ruling said that had Long Son Co. not attempted to flatten the land where Hien and his men were growing their crops in the first place, the tragedy would not have happened.

Grabbing land with force

The piece of land in dispute is a 1,079-hectare forest land called 1535 in Quang Truc Commune, Tuy Duc District, Dak Nong.

According to court documents, in February 2008 the Quang Truc administration transferred the land in question to Long Son Co. to develop an agro-forestry project there.

In June 2013, the project was put under the management of Suu.

During the implementation of the Long Son project, some local farmers, including Hien, Binh and Hoang Van Thang, started growing their coffee and cashew crops on the land, leading to a dispute.

Local authorities failed in their many attempts to settle the conflict between the company and farmers.

The row continued to prolong until the morning of October 23, 2016, when Suu and Thien gathered some Long Son guards and employees to storm into the land in dispute with some weapons and a tractor to level the area.



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The shields and weapons used in the deadly land grab are seen after being seized by police. Photo: Tuoi Tre

The group eventually destroyed more than 330 trees, causing total damage of VND73.6 million (US\$3,242), on the crops of Hien, Thang and a man named Trieu Phu Cao.

These actions led to imprisonment for Suu and Thien on charges of “destroying or deliberately damaging others’ assets.”

The court ruled that Suu and Thien had violated the law when they ‘put together’ the group to grab the land by force, even when that plot of land had been transferred to them.

Last straw

On the tragic morning, after seeing people from Long Son Co. storming into his crops, Hien, who would later be sentenced to death, grabbed his sports gun and stopped the ‘intruders’ at the entrance.

Hien at first only fired the gun into the air, hoping to drive the intruders away and protect his family, he told Wednesday’s court.

However, as the Long Son men did not stop and fought back with stones, Hien opened fire straight on them and returned to his house, where he continued shooting at the men from the mezzanine.

Binh, also carrying a sports gun, then arrived at Hien’s crops and the two immediately left for the plantation of Thang to protect their neighbor.

At Thang’s crops, Hien and Binh repeatedly opened fire on the Long Son men and their tractor, and even chased after them when the ‘land grabbers’ ran away, eventually killing three of them and injuring 13 others.

Hien was found guilty of directly causing all of the three deaths.

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Nguyen Xuan Thien Suu is seen at the court. Photo: Tuoi Tre

Lawyer Nguyen Van Quynh, who represented Hien and other farmers, suggested that the court took into account the fact that his client had acted in a state of being provoked, rather than “intentionally committed an act of violence” as the court documents stated.

However, none of the pleas or suggestions by the accused and their lawyers at the two-day court were accepted.

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P.S.

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