

Petition Calls on Vietnam to Reverse Death Sentence in Land Dispute Killings

Sunday 18 March 2018, by [RFA's Vietnamese Service](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2018).

Hundreds of signatories have lent their support to a petition calling on Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang and the country's Supreme Court to reverse a death sentence for a farmer who killed three people in a land dispute, saying the verdict in the case is too severe.

A court in central Vietnam's Dak Nong province sentenced Dang Van Hien, 42, to death last week for shooting dead three employees of the Long Son Limited Company and injuring 16 others in October 2016 when they tried to raze the cashew and coffee fields he had cultivated for years on the firm's land in Tuy Duc district.

Fellow farmers Ninh Viet Binh and Ha Van Truong were also convicted of murder and received 20 and 12 years in prison, respectively, while Long Son Limited's owner, Nguyen Thien Suu, was handed six years in jail for destroying Hien's property.

Hien's sentence has drawn criticism from observers, who say the farmer was forced to defend his land because of the company's wrongdoing, and that he should instead have been tried for "murder due to provocation" under Article 95 of Vietnam's Penal Code, which carries a maximum seven-year jail term.

As of Tuesday, five NGOs and nearly 400 individuals had signed a petition, dated Jan. 8, requesting that President Quang and the Supreme Court undertake a "serious review" of the verdict against Hien, who they said opened fire "as a last resort after suffering a lengthy period of repression and sabotage."

The sentence handed to Hien was "too heavy and unfair," the petition said, adding that as Vietnamese citizens, the signatories "demand justice from the government."

Nha Trang-based independent journalist Vo Van Tao, one of the petition's signatories, told RFA's Vietnamese Service Tuesday that the Dak Nong incident had "sparked anger and shock among the public."

"When I received the petition requesting the state to reconsider the verdict, I immediately signed it, posted it on my Facebook page, and contacted intellectuals I know in the country and abroad to join me in adding their names," he said.

"We share the same opinion—that's why the petition came together so quickly and smoothly. We all think that this sentence is extremely unfair."

Among the reasons given for why Hien's sentence should be reconsidered, the petition states that the charge of murder is "inconsistent with the case" and the actions of the defendants, that Hien turned himself in and should be shown leniency, and that Dak Nong and Tuy Duc authorities were

negligent in failing to resolve the dispute before it became violent.

The petition also alleges that the legal system and law enforcement agencies do not protect citizens and instead are “tools used by special interest groups” to rob the people of their land, that legislation on land ownership has granted authorities vast power to grab land, and that society will be left “unstable and chaotic” when the people no longer trust the government to act in their interests.

Land disputes are the main source of protests in one-party Communist Vietnam, where dissent is not tolerated.

Such disputes accounted for 70 percent of all complaints lodged against the government in 2012, according to state media, and remain the top reason for complaints by Vietnamese citizens, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc said at a meeting last month.

Reported by RFA's Vietnamese Service

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* 2018-01-09:

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/sentence-01092018144806.html>

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