

Vietnam faces global calls to release anti-coal activist

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NGOs, governments and the United Nations have criticised ‘tax evasion’ charges leveled against Nguy Thi Khanh.

International groups are increasing pressure on the Vietnamese government to release anti-coal campaigner Nguy Thi Khanh, the director of civil society organization the Green Innovation and Development Centre (GreenID).

On Tuesday U.S.-based NGO [Oil Change International](#) (OCI) voiced its support for the campaign, demanding her immediate release.

“Our message to the government of Vietnam is that you cannot jail leading activists and claim to be a climate leader. You will never silence influential voices who speak out against the dirty fossil fuel business. The more you imprison people, the more you empower others,” the group said in a news release.

The OCI also called on the Vietnamese government to release three other environmental activists, Mai Phan Loi, Dang Dinh Bach, and Bach Hung Duong.

All four are serving prison sentences on tax evasion charges. Nguy Thi Khanh, 46, was sentenced to 24 months in prison by the Hanoi People’s Court on June 17. The other three were sentenced to between two and a half and five years in prison.

OCI’s Asia program director, Susanne Wong urged G7 leaders, who met in Germany this week, to use their influence to “protect the rapidly shrinking civil society space in Vietnam” and “ensure that just transition packages with the Vietnamese government include provisions to protect civil society engagement in climate discussions and to guard against the use of administrative laws to silence activists.”

Four days before OCI’s announcement, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Activists, an alliance of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), issued a [statement](#) calling on the international community to speak out about the cases along with those of other human rights activists.

It also expressed concern over the Vietnamese government’s frequent use of tax evasion charges as a weapon to silence activists. The coalition urged individuals and organizations around the world to write to the Vietnamese government, calling on it to end its crackdown on human rights and environmental activists, release those serving prison sentences and ensure all activists are able to operate without fear of reprisal.

Andrea Giorgetta, director of FIDH’s Asia Office, said it was important to give environmentalists the freedom to speak out.

“Environmental activists such as Khanh play a vital role in ensuring that environmental rights and principles are part of the Vietnamese government’s policies, which have historically followed a top-down approach without any genuine public consultation and input,” he said.

“The jailing of Khanh and the other environmental activists represents a worrying escalation by Hanoi in the repression of civil society. Khanh, Bach, and Loi were not hardcore government critics - their organizations in fact sought to engage the Vietnamese government with regard to the implementation of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement. Their imprisonment shows that in Vietnam nobody is safe from government persecution.”

Giorgetta said it appeared that the Vietnamese government was adopting subtler tactics to escape international criticism.

“Perhaps Hanoi believes that the use of tax laws as opposed to the enforcement of draconian national security legislation will not trigger international condemnation. But the harsh prison sentences imposed on Khanh, Bach, and Loi for tax evasion show that Hanoi considers environmental activists to be as dangerous as dissidents, and that they must all be silenced.”

Five months after Vietnam sentenced Mai Phan Loi, Dang Dinh Bach, and Bach Hung Duong to prison and nearly two weeks after the trial of Nguy Thi Khanh, the campaign for their release has snowballed.

There are now three governments, the United States, Britain, and Canada, as well as various NGOs including the Climate Action Network (CAN), voicing their opposition to the activists’ conviction and calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

The United Nations Human Rights Office and the UN Environmental Programme also issued a [statement](#) on April 22 expressing deep concern about the imprisonment of human rights and environmental protection activists for alleged “tax evasion” in Vietnam.

The U.S. President’s climate envoy John Kerry and his European Union counterpart Frans Timmermans issued a joint call on June 26 demanding the release of Khanh and other environmental activists imprisoned in Vietnam.

On June 23 Vietnam’s Foreign Ministry rejected international criticism of the case against Khanh, insisting that her prison sentence was legal.

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