

USA

Pro-democracy Leaders, Jailed Journalist Among US 'Women of Courage' Honorees

March 14, 2022 4:26 PM

Nike Ching

WASHINGTON — The United States honored 12 women from Colombia, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Vietnam and other countries, with the State Department saying they have demonstrated leadership and a willingness to sacrifice for others at an "International Women of Courage Award" ceremony Monday in Washington.

This year's honorees include Syeda Rizwana Hasan, an environmental lawyer from Bangladesh; Simone Sibilio do Nascimento, one of Brazil's most prominent prosecutors; Ei Thinzar Maung, Myanmar's pro-democracy opposition National Unity Government Deputy Minister for Women, Youths, and Children Affairs; Josefina Klinger Zúñiga, a human rights and environmental defender from Colombia; Taif Sami Mohammed, Iraq's deputy finance minister known for fighting corruption; Facia Boyenoh Harris, who advocates for women's rights and speaks out against gender-based violence in Liberia; Libya's first woman foreign minister, Najla Mangoush; Moldova's parliament member Doina Gherman, who promotes women's inclusion; transgender activist Bhumika Shrestha who is from Nepal; Carmen Gheorghe, who promotes women's rights in Romania; Roegchanda Pascoe, a crime prevention activist from South Africa; and jailed Vietnamese journalist Phạm Đoan Trang.

SEE ALSO:

[Three African Women to Receive Courage Awards](#)

Jailed Vietnamese journalist absent in virtual ceremony

Phạm Đoan Trang did not attend Monday's virtual award ceremony, since she is currently in prison.

Pham Doan Trang is seen as a leading advocate for human rights, rule of law, and the inclusion of all voices in political spaces in Vietnam. She was sentenced to nine years in prison on Dec. 14, 2021, for "making, storing, distributing or disseminating information, documents and items against the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam," according to Amnesty International.

"We condemn her unjust imprisonment. We call for her immediate release," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken during Monday's ceremony.

Pham Chinh Truc is Pham Doan Trang's brother. He attended the trial in December with their 81-year-old mother. Pham Chinh Truc told VOA Vietnamese he raised objections at the hearing and called the verdict "completely absurd and unacceptable."

"Trang was convicted under Article 88 'Propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,'" he said in the VOA interview. "As far as I know, this article has been criticized by many individuals, social organizations, and even the United Nations, who have asked the Vietnamese government to revoke this law because it is too vague. Its boundaries are not clear, but it has been used to arrest many people who have views that are contrary to the views held by the party and state."

Phạm Doan Trang was a journalist with government media before leaving to write independently on democracy and free elections, according to advocacy group The 88 Project.

The United States values its comprehensive partnership with Vietnam but believes firmly that "in order for this country to thrive, it needs to embrace the openness, transparency, inclusion, and respect for the rights of all of its citizens that Phạm Doan Trang has relentlessly sought through her writing and advocacy," said U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper in a pre-taped message.

Burmese award winner

Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been displaced since a military coup that toppled the democratically elected government of Myanmar, also known as Burma, on Feb. 1, 2021.

The U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR) said the number of internally displaced people in the country is now over 800,000. Some 440,000 people have been newly displaced since the coup, adding to an existing 370,000 who had fled their homes previously.

This month, Myanmar's junta stripped the citizenship of 16 prominent opposition figures, including senior members of the National Unity Government, which is leading the resistance to the military regime.

Ei Thinzar Maung is among the NUG members whose citizenship was revoked.

She was honored with the State Department's 2022 Women of Courage Award for her commitment to democracy and work for a strong, inclusive and democratic Myanmar that respects human rights.

"We are not going to ever give up. Democracy must be restored," said Ei Thinzar Maung in a pre-taped message. While being forced into hiding due to torture and death threats, Ei Thinzar Maung continues to speak out against the 2021 military coup. She is the youngest woman to run in Myanmar's general election held in 2020.

A champion of the rights of women and young people, Ei Thinzar Maung also advocated for ethnic minorities. She was beaten and jailed for more than a year after leading a 644-kilometer march from Mandalay to Yangon in 2015 to protest a national education law that excluded ethnic languages and restricted student unions.

On Oct. 30, 2020, she spoke to VOA Burmese in its Weekly Women's Corner program.

"I'm 25 years old and I've been competing as an adult, but in the eyes of others they see me as a child. No matter what I say."

She added, "Look around us and in Asia. Now the Thai student movement is led by students. The Hong Kong movement is led by students. There are a lot of students in the political process in Burma."

Bangladesh's honoree

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, a Bangladeshi lawyer, is also one of the recipients of the International Women of Courage Award this year.

The State Department says she has shown exceptional courage in her mission to protect the environment and defend the rights of marginalized Bangladeshis. As chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, she has won cases against deforestation, pollution, unregulated ship breaking, and illegal land development.

"In the context of Bangladesh, this award is important because it shows that working on environmental issues is important. It is also a recognition that this difficult job is done by a female leader," Syeda Rizwana Hasan said in an interview with VOA's Bangla Service.

Monday, first lady Jill Biden spoke during the ceremony about the barriers and struggles awardees continue to face.

"For 16 years, these awards have lifted up the voices of women around the world. It has shined light on the struggles and strength of women in the global north, south, east and west," Biden said.

"We will tell your stories, even when you cannot."

VOA Vietnamese, Burmese and Bangla services contributed to this report.
