

OVERVIEW OF FORMOSA INDUSTRIAL POLLUTION IN VIETNAM: WE CHOSE FISH

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Người dân từ khắp mọi miền đã đồng hành đòi Formosa phải chịu trách nhiệm làm sạch môi trường và đòi hỏi chính quyền phải minh bạch hơn.

THE BEGINNING

- April 2016
- **April 4**
- Fisherman Nguyen Xuan Thanh (36 years old, a resident of Ba Dong hamlet, Ky Phuong commune, Ky Anh district, Ha Tinh) dived into the sea and unexpectedly discovered a giant waste discharge pipe. This pipe has a diameter of about 1m. It was discharging a yellow liquid.
- The pipe was identified as a submerged pipe belonging to the Formosa corporation, 1.5km in length, buried under the seabed. Formosa confirmed that they have an underground sewage system connecting directly from the Formosa project site in the Vung Ang economic zone to the sea.

DURING THE MONTH OF APRIL 2016

- Wild fish died in mass in four coastal provinces of Central Vietnam.
- **April 11**
- The Northern Environmental Monitoring and Aquatic Diseases Center (Aquaculture Research Institute 1 – MARD) published an announcement about the results of their unscheduled monitoring after the abnormal fish deaths took place in Ky Anh, Ha Tinh.
- The announcement concluded that virus causing disease was not the cause of this phenomenon, rather fish died in mass due to “toxic agents in the water” in Vung Ang coast. According to this Center, toxin agents originated from untreated wastewater discharged directly into the sea and rivers, polluting seawater and intoxicated fish

DIVER'S DEATH

- **April 24**
- Le Van Ngay (born 1970, from Khanh Hoa), a diver working for Nibelc Company (the building contractor for Formosa's breakwater in Son Duong port), died mysteriously a hospital. A few hours before, he suffered from chest pains and breathing difficulties during work and was taken to hospital for emergency treatment.

CHOOSE FISH OR CHOOSE STEEL

- **April 25**
- Mr. Chou Chun Fan, Deputy Head of Formosa's External Relations Department, Head of the Formosa Office in Ha Noi, said this in a conversation over-the-phone with Tuoi Tre (Youth) newspaper: "It is impossible to build a steel plant here without leaving any impact on fish and shrimp...Between these two things, we must choose one, whether I want to catch fish and shrimp or I want to build a modern steel industry? "

MORE TESTS POINTED TO MASS TOXIFICATION

- **April 26**

- Quang Binh province called for an urgent meeting. The Chair of the Provincial People's Committee, Mr. Nguyen Huu Hoai, ordered a ban on swimming in the sea during this time to prevent any mishaps.
- The Thua Thien-Hue Department of Natural Resources and Environment announced that they received the analysis result from the water sample taken from Lang Co lagoon and Lang Co seaport (Lang Co town, Phu Loc), the seaside along Quang Cong commune (Quang Dien), Dien Huong, Dien Hai (Phong Dien). According to the analysis, the total nitrogen content (nitrogen, chemical symbol N) calculated on ammonium content (NH₄), heavy metal chromium content (chromium, chemical symbol Cr) exceeds the limit allowed by the National Technical Regulation on seawater quality and National Technical Regulation on surface water quality.
- This result also pointed out that the cause of both wild fish and farmed fish's death was not a disease but rather a very powerful agent – a toxic in the water originating from somewhere north of Thua Thien-Hue province.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND ACTIVISTS STEPPED IN

- Created Facebook fan pages to publish and gather all stories written on the disaster:
<https://web.facebook.com/cuubiencuudan/>
- <https://web.facebook.com/savevnsea/>
- Assisted victims directly
- Traveled to affected areas to record on location
- Contacted Taiwanese and other international network of environmental organizations
- Pressuring various governmental agencies
- Call to protest when government and Formosa refused to engage
- Coordinated efforts made by many individuals and groups from inside and outside of Vietnam
- All done on Facebook as the main platform

FIRST PUBLIC APOLOGY BY FORMOSA

- Also on April 26, 2016, in the afternoon, Mr. Chou Chun Fan and the management team in Ha Tinh organized a press conference and bowed to apologize for their statement of “choose fish or choose steel.”

FIRST PROTEST BROKE OUT BY FISHERMEN IN AREA

• April 28:

- Human rights activist Truong Minh Tam, a member of the Vietnam Path Movement, was arrested by the Ha Tinh and Quang Binh police for “shooting video and taking photographs in Ky Loi commune, Ky Ha commune and Dong Yen parish” in Ky Anh commune.
- Hundreds of fishermen in Canh Duong commune, Quang Trach district, Quang Binh province protested fiercely during hot noon on the 28th, 29th and 30th of April, demanding the government to expel Formosa from Vietnam and return clean sea to the people. The protest blocked traffic on National Highway 1 – the connection between the North and the South.

NATIONWIDE PROTESTS

- **May 1**
- Thousands went on demonstrations in major cities such as Hanoi, Saigon, Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Vung Tau. In Hai Phong, demonstrations were held with banners hung on buses.
- Minister of Information and Communications Truong Minh Tuan and a group of journalists went out to eat “Vung Ang seafood” to show that the sea had been free from pollution already, that patriotism meant to eat fish and take sea swimming...

NATIONWIDE PROTESTS CONTINUED DESPITE CRACKDOWNS

- **May 8**
- Public protests continued to break up in Ha Noi, Saigon. They were brutally suppressed. In Saigon, the local government deployed strange forces, whose functions were unknown, to snatch slogans, beat and arrest protesters. Hoang My Uyen, a young woman who was carrying her child in the march, was blown up and kicked on her face. Her photo, with scratches on the face, hugging her child in a panic, provoked public indignation on the Internet. Dozens of people were arrested and held at local “social protection centers”. They were beaten, electrocuted, and locked for 2-3 days.
- In Hanoi, dozens of people were also arrested and held at various police stations. However, they were released within the day.

PROTESTS CONTINUED IN MAY 2016 IN SMALLER SCALE

- **May 13**
- A newspaper named “Nong thon Ngay nay” (Countryside Today) got a fine of VND 140 million for publishing two articles on the “The gioi Tiep thi” (Marketing World) magazine. The articles were titled “The people are always those left behind” and “The lament of fish.”
- Paulus Nguyen Thai Hop, Bishop of Vinh Diocese, sent an open letter titled “Public letter on the catastrophic pollution of the marine environment in central Vietnam.” The Vietnam Television described the letter as “a biased depiction of the occurrence, exaggerated, causing anxiety, and using provocative language to abet the parishioners.”

INTERNATIONAL AWARENESS

- The Office of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (OHCHR) in Bangkok proclaimed their worries about the increasing violence against the demonstrators for Vietnam's environment.

PUBLIC AWARENESS RAISED BY MANY, INCLUDING SOME STATE-OWNED MEDIA AND CELEBRITIES

- **May 29**

- In VTV's talk-show "60 Open Minutes", whose theme was "Sharing on social media, what is it for?", MC Ta Bich Loan questioned Phan Anh, another MC, on his sharing of a clip by VTC News about an experiment on dead fish that the VTC team carried out in Vung Ang. Loan asked Phan Anh what his motive was in sharing the clip. Hong Thanh Quang, a police-background journalist, and Pham Manh Ha, a behavioral psychologist, also questioned him aggressively. The program aroused a storm of public opinion among the facebookers. The great majority of people supported Phan Anh and were indignant with Loan and Quang. After the talk-show, Phan Anh became even more famous for his words, "Don't be silent."
- The VTC's video clip was about an experiment in which "the fish died within only 2 minutes' swimming in Vung Ang' sea water". It was broadcast on the VTC's Evening News of April 26 and got bitterly criticized by state-owned newspapers and *du luan vien* (public opinion shapers), who alleged it to be "dishonest" and "misleading".

TAIWANESE MEDIA AND ACTIVISTS STEPPED IN

- **June 20**

- At 9:00 p.m. Hanoi time, PTS Our Island, a Taiwanese broadcast, released a TV report on the fish death disaster in central Vietnam.
- The report was also posted on PTS' YouTube video channel and translated into Vietnamese by Vietnamese activists, evoking strong emotions from the audience. That was the first time a media agency made a TV report about the desperate situation of the fishermen and protesters for environmental protection in Vietnam. Ironically the media agency was a foreign company, and even more, it was from Formosa's homeland, Taiwan.

FORMOSA FORMAL APOLOGIZED

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rji8PwMGD4>
- At 17:00, the government held a press conference to proclaim the cause of fish deaths: It was Hung Nghiep Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Co., Ltd. (FHS) that was the perpetrator. Chen Yuan Cheng, chairman of the company, apologized and pledged to pay VND 11,500 billion (approx. USD \$500 million) as compensation.

TAIWANESE GOVERNMENT

- **August 1**

- Su Chih Fen, a Taiwanese congresswoman, member of the Democratic Progressive Party, had her passport confiscated and was detained at Noi Bai International Airport for nine hours while she was leading a delegation to Vietnam to inspect FHS.

Vietnamese state-owned newspapers published a piece of news that there was a Taiwanese congresswoman going to Ha Tinh to inspect FHS, without mentioning the fact that she was blocked at the airport by the MPS and prevented from doing entry procedures. Nguyen Anh Tuan, a civil society activist, together with numerous local people, assisted Su and she managed, at last, to get to Ha Tinh (with stringent limits), accompanied by two victims of the Formosa disaster the next day, August 2.

PROTESTS CONTINUED IN A FEW AFFECTED AREAS LED BY CATHOLIC PRIESTS

- August 2016:
- **August 15**
- Over 4,000 parishioners of Quy Hoa parish, also in Ky Anh District, Ha Tinh Province took a march from the church to the district people's committee, asking for the local government's transparency of compensation to fishermen.

PROTESTS CONTINUED WELL INTO 2017

- October 2016
- **October 2**
- About 13,000 people attended the biggest ever demonstration against Formosa in Ky Anh district. The protesters surrounded the steel company, holding signs demanding Formosa to get out of Vietnam. Police and army troops were deployed to protect the Taiwanese investor, who closed all its doors to the angry crowd.
- Compensation and government's assistance still not reached affected victims.

EFFORTS BY CIVIL SOCIETY CONTINUED

- To date, Vietnamese activists continued to work with Taiwanese activists to assist people in affected areas.
- Many were arrested and sentenced to prison for writing, blogging about Formosa Mass Fish Kill.

AWARENESS INCREASED REGARDING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

- And so is suppression by the government
- Social media activism is under attack in Vietnam
- New Cybersecurity law
- Facebook's Cooperating with Vietnamese government?

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- **Timeline: The Formosa Environmental Disaster:**
<https://www.thevietnamese.org/2017/11/timeline-the-formosa-environmental-disaster/>
- **An Overview Of The Marine Life Disaster In Vietnam, Paperback:**
<https://www.amazon.com/Overview-Marine-Life-Disaster-Vietnam/dp/1539627608>