

Vietnam Detains Three Activist Bloggers Who Met With EU Delegation

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Blogger Pham Doan Trang in an undated photo.

Authorities in Vietnam’s capital Hanoi briefly detained three activist bloggers shortly after they met with representatives of the European Union to discuss the situation of human rights in their country, according to one of the trio.

Police detained Pham Doan Trang, Nguyen Quang A, and former prisoner of conscience Bui Thi Minh Hang around noon on Nov. 16 as they left a meeting with the EU officials, though A and Hang were freed several hours later, Hang told RFA’s Vietnamese Service on Friday.

“When we were leaving the building, Trang and I were going to go buy something for lunch, but all of a sudden about 20 [police] rushed us and took me into a car to separate us,” said the blogger, who was released from prison in February after serving a three-year prison sentence on charges of “causing

public disorder.”

“It was Trang who they really wanted to take, because she’s been contributing so much to our movement. The security officials are very angry at her.”

According to a statement issued Friday by the Luat Khoa Tap Chi [Journal of Law] blog, which was cofounded by Trang, police eventually returned her to her home around midnight that evening and placed her under guard. A number of Trang’s personal belongings, including her cellphone and laptop, were confiscated, the statement said.

Luat Khoa Tap Chi condemned Trang’s detention, during which she was held incommunicado, calling the act a “violation of Vietnamese and international law.”

Trang was also placed in an “extremely dangerous situation” because she is currently undergoing medical treatment for a leg injury, the statement said.

Hang told RFA that Thursday’s meeting was held in preparation for an annual human rights dialogue between the EU and Vietnam set for next month, and that Trang had provided the EU delegation with updated reports on the human rights situation in Vietnam, the Formosa toxic waste spill that destroyed the livelihoods of coastal residents last year, and the state of religious freedom in the country.

“They always want to talk with activists in the country before this dialogue,” she said.

“They have been preparing a document to discuss in the meeting and they want to consult activists to get various perspectives. [The document] covers issues such as detentions, the role of lawyers, the state of the country’s prisons, and land and religion laws.”

Nguyen Chi Tuyen, a fourth activist who attended the meeting with EU officials, posted a message on his Facebook account Friday confirming that he had returned home safely after the discussion.

Ongoing crackdown

Activists are routinely harassed by authorities for meeting with foreign delegations in one-party Communist Vietnam, where dissent is not tolerated.

Trang was prevented from attending a meeting to discuss human rights with then-U.S. President Barack Obama when he visited Hanoi in May 2016, though she was not detained.

Last week, police in Hanoi called two members of the online Brotherhood for Democracy advocacy group to their offices this week to answer questions concerning their activities, but the two men refused to go, saying they had done nothing to break the law.

The summons came amid a months-long crackdown by authorities on dissident writers and bloggers, and just two days before U.S. President Donald Trump and other world leaders arrived in Vietnam for top-level regional meetings.

The media is state controlled in Vietnam and rights groups have identified Article 79 — working to

“overthrow the People’s government”—as among a set of vague provisions that authorities have used to detain dozens of writers and bloggers in recent years.

Activist bloggers Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, arrested in October 2016, and Tran Thi Nga, arrested in January of this year, have been sentenced to prison terms of 10 and nine years respectively.

Vietnam is currently holding at least 84 prisoners of conscience, the highest number in any country in Southeast Asia, according to rights group Amnesty International.

Reported by RFA’s Vietnamese Service. Translated by Emily Peyman. Written in English by Joshua Lipes.