

PRESS FREEDOM

Vietnam Violated Journalist's Rights, UN Watchdog Says

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An Hai

Pressure is mounting on Vietnam to release an imprisoned journalist known for her coverage of human rights issues.

An opinion issued by the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that journalist Pham Doan Trang was denied her rights following her October 2020 arrest and subsequent detention in Ho Chi Minh City.

A copy of the working group's opinion, sent to the journalist's lawyer on October 25, said, "The appropriate remedy would be to release [Trang] immediately and accord her an enforceable right to compensation and other reparations, in accordance with international law."

Trang, who co-founded the independent magazine *Luat Khoa* and *The Vietnamese news website*, reported on issues including police harassment.

Before her arrest on charges of anti-state propaganda, Trang said on social media that police were harassing her because of her reporting.

Trang's lawyer, Kurtulus Bastimar, told VOA Vietnamese the U.N. found that authorities arrested Trang without a warrant, and that she was not informed of the charges against her or given an opportunity to challenge her detention. Both are considered violations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Bastimar said the ruling was significant.

"The U.N. working group in this decision has decided that Pham Doan Trang has been placed outside of the protection of the law," he said. "This is really important."

Also significant, Bastimar said, is that the U.N. body did not recognize Vietnam's judicial authority as competent.

"So, they are not independent in the eyes of the U.N. Working Group," he said.

Bastimar said he also believes the U.N. opinion could assist Vietnamese lawyers, who can use its findings on human rights violations and violations of international law in cases they are defending.

The Vietnamese embassy in Washington did not respond to VOA's request for comment. Neither the Ministry of Public Security nor the Hanoi City prosecutor's office responded to a request for comment.

Trang's case was also highlighted by a coalition of human rights groups which called on Vietnam to "immediately and unconditionally" release the journalist, who is due to go on trial November 4.

A joint statement Tuesday from 28 civil society organizations, including Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists and various Vietnamese groups, said Trang had been denied access to her lawyers and family for over a year.

"It is clear that Pham Doan Trang is being persecuted for her long-standing work as an independent journalist, book publisher, and human rights defender, known for writing about topics ranging from environmental rights to police violence, as well as for her advocacy for press freedom," the statement said.

Vietnam has a poor record for media freedom, ranking 175 out of 180 countries, where 1 is freest, on the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

"Vietnam's press freedom and the human rights are definitely under huge pressure," Bastimar said, adding that those who criticize the government or its policies risk being arrested.

Punishing journalists is a barrier for democracy, Bastimar said.

"Fundamental rights, especially the right to freedom of expression, is a cornerstone for a government to reach the democratic environment," he said.

This story originated in VOA's Vietnamese Service.
