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Viet Nam: Series of attacks on political activists, human rights defenders and their relatives must be investigated

Three recent attacks on people who have been deliberately knocked off their motorbikes appear to be part of a wider series of attacks against political activists, human rights defenders and their relatives. Amnesty International urges the Viet Nam authorities to immediately and impartially investigate these incidents and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Throughout July 2016, there were several attacks against political activists, human rights defenders, and their relatives. These included three incidents within four days where the victims were forced from their motorbikes as they travelled at speed. The three incidents, described below, bear striking resemblances and took place in circumstances that strongly indicate the involvement of police or of people working under police orders.

On 10 July Lã Việt Dũng, well-known for his online political activism, was attacked after taking part in a football game with the No-U Football Club, a club which opposes Chinese foreign policy in Viet Nam. Dũng told Amnesty International that when he arrived to take part in the game, two uniformed police officers and eight to ten other men in plain clothes were present. According to Dũng, these men ordered the staff of the football pitch facility to inform the team that they could not play. The players persisted, arguing that they had reserved the pitch and paid in advance.

When they eventually left the facility to congregate at a nearby restaurant, they were followed by the police and men in plain clothes. As the members of the team ate in the restaurant, the police and plain clothes men waited outside in and on their vehicles, which included one marked police car and six motorbikes without police insignia. When the players emerged from the restaurant and went their separate ways, several of them were followed by these men.

Dũng told Amnesty International that when he was around 2km from the restaurant, travelling by motorbike, and as he turned on to a dark road he noticed that he was being followed by three motorbikes, each of which had a rider and passenger. One of the motorbikes cut in front of Dũng, causing him to lose control. When Dũng fell to the ground, the two other motorbikes stopped and their riders and passengers surrounded him, kicking him in the head as he lay on the ground. The motorbike that had cut him off turned around and its rider and passenger joined in the violence. The men kicked Dũng countless times in the head. They also hit him several times on the head with a brick.

Dũng's assailants left when people emerged from houses along the road. A passing car took Dũng to the hospital. He had sustained a number of injuries to the head. He explained to Amnesty International that his injuries would have been much worse had he not been wearing a helmet.

On 13 July, retired teacher and democracy activist Tô Oanh and his wife, Hoang Thi Nhu Hoa, were travelling by motorbike to their home in Bắc Giang province when a man, who they say was in his 30s and who was travelling in the same direction, veered his motorbike in front of theirs, causing them to lose control. They both fell to the ground and were injured: Tô Oanh was knocked unconscious and a bone in his face was broken, and Hoang Thi Nhu Hoa sustained minor injuries. The assailant turned his vehicle around and rode back in the opposite direction.

On the morning of the same day, Nguyễn Trung Đức, whose mother is human rights defender and recently released prisoner of conscience, Hồ Thị Bích Khương, sustained injuries to his head and arm in an almost identical incident to that involving Tô Oanh and his wife. As Đức was driving his motorbike in Nghệ An province, two men riding parallel to him on another motorbike cut across him, causing him to lose control of the vehicle. Đức fell to the ground and was knocked unconscious. He woke a short time later covered in blood. As in the case of Oanh and Hoa, Đức's assailant rode away from the scene.

Đức made his way to hospital where he received dozens of stitches to close a deep wound running 15cm along the top of his head and a 10cm wound running along his upper right arm. In the days before the attack on Đức, men in plain clothes known to be police were stationed outside the house where he and Hồ Thị Bích Khương live in Nam Đàn district, Nghệ An province, apparently keeping his mother under surveillance. On 8 July, Đức and Hồ Thị Bích Khương visited his grandmother's house. Shortly after they left there via a back entrance, police entered the house searching upstairs and downstairs, demanding to know where Hồ Thị Bích Khương had gone.

The three incidents outlined above were deliberate attacks. The circumstances surrounding these attacks raise serious concerns that these attacks were undertaken by or at the instigation of police. Amnesty International calls on the Vietnamese authorities to immediately and impartially investigate these attacks and to prosecute those suspected of responsibility for them, regardless of their official capacity or otherwise.

Viet Nam has a longstanding reputation of being one of Asia's most prolific jailers of political activists and human rights defenders. Amnesty International conservatively estimates that there are currently at least 84 prisoners of conscience in the country. In recent years, physical attacks against political activists and human rights defenders have increased, with scores injured in vicious assaults committed by men in uniform or plain clothes known or believed to be police.