

SECOND VIETNAM HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY DAY

Workshop on Human Rights and the Environment Parliament of Canada

Notes for Hon. David Kilgour

10 May 2018

Thank you to the Canadian Youth for Human Rights in Vietnam (CYHRV) and its Adviser, Mr. Can Le, the Free Vietnamese Canadian Community of Ottawa, and the sponsorship by Mr. James Bezan, M.P. for Selkirk - Interlake - Eastman, MP for this workshop on the 2nd Vietnam Human Rights Advocacy Day.

Human Rights

At least 112 bloggers and activists are currently serving prison sentences for expressing their opinions by calling in increasing numbers for democracy and greater freedoms. The government in Hanoi should unconditionally release them and repeal all laws that criminalize peaceful expression.

International donors and trade partners of the country should speak out forcefully on these abuses.

The Environment

In 2017, *The Economist* reported that pollution mars much of Viet Nam's landscape — dam-building is corroding the Mê Kông Delta; smog smothers Hà Nội, and much of Hồ Chí Minh City could be underwater by the end of the century. Viet Nam's environmental pollution challenges include air, water, and solid waste. Major factors contributing to these problems include rapid urbanization, accelerating industrialization, weak enforcement of the laws on environmental protection, and a lack of education and cultural awareness.

In addition, farmers continue to lose land to development projects without adequate compensation, and workers are not allowed to form independent unions.

The environmental issue cuts across all divides, uniting poor rural fisherman and relatively wealthy urban liberals; consumers and producers; democrats and socialists.

The government is aware that environmental concerns embolden critics and disaffect loyalists. When farmlands flood because of industrial waste and poor upkeep, or waters contain only inedible fish, or a foreign-owned factory treats the country's environment with contempt, citizens grow weary.

2016 was the year when environmental activism went mainstream. The Formosa fish kill scandal that left some 100 tonnes of fish dead along Viet Nam's central coast galvanized a citizenry to urgent awareness of serious environmental problems. Thousands protested the Taiwanese steel mill's pollution in the major cities. Ordinary people began to care about their food and air quality, as well as the impact on fishermen and others from ongoing environmental damage.

Permit me now to mention only 3 of the many environmental concerns in Vietnam:

- **1. The Tân Rai and Nhân Cơ Bauxite Projects (Alumina Plants)**

Viet Nam holds the world's third-largest bauxite ore reserves, located in the Central Highlands in Lâm Đồng and Đắk Nông provinces.

In 2007, it made official its plan and signed a strategic agreement with the Chinese government to extract bauxite resources.

A series of letters written by retired General Võ Nguyên Giáp (a hero of the independence struggle) protesting the government's plans for the project and warning of China's invasive economic ties to Viet Nam's core domestic interests, drew international attention to the issue.

Despite that, the state-owned corporation Viet Nam National Coal and Mineral Industries Group (VINACOMIN) went ahead with the Tân Rai Plant. In 2012, it began extracting and processing aluminum from its raw source, bauxite.

The greatest concern associated with bauxite mining lies in the impact of the red sludge (bauxite residue) and tailing slurry (waste water discharged during the sifting process) on the Central Highlands' environment and its downstream region. Containing high levels of metal oxide and sodium hydroxide, the sludge could cause great damage to water supplies and the surrounding agricultural industry (primarily coffee), as well as to the health and safety of thousands of residents in the area.

The technical design of the Tân Rai complex is problematic, given that Chalico (a subsidiary of the Aluminum Corporation of China, the world's third-largest aluminum producer, didn't use advanced technologies in designing the alumina plants.

The daily lives of citizens nearby have been significantly affected. They must bear the stench and deal with immense aluminum dust everywhere -- in their gardens, rooftops, and inside their homes. The elderly and children have suffered from respiratory diseases. The discharged waste seeps into the ground, killing all the plants and causing itchiness upon touch.

In addition, deforestation, increased vulnerability to drought and floods in the lowlands, relocation and population displacement in a region that is traditionally home to hill tribes and indigenous populations, and the large amount of freshwater required for mining bauxite and producing alumina when water scarcity is growing in the Central Highlands, are matters of concern.

Conclusion re: bauxite projects

Needless to say, no new alumina plants should be constructed in Viet Nam.

• 2. Coal Pollution

The growth of coal power plants in Viet Nam creates high environmental costs from regional air pollution due to emissions from coal-fired power plants

Researchers warn that by 2030, Viet Nam will be the ASEAN country most affected by coal pollution in terms of the premature mortality rate due to coal plant emissions, with 188.8 excess deaths per million people. In total, it is estimated that there will be almost 20,000 excess deaths per year by 2030 in Viet Nam due to coal pollution.

The Vietnamese government announced last year its decision to scrap its ambitious plan to introduce nuclear energy to Viet Nam. The 6,000 MW capacity that was previously projected for nuclear power up to 2030 will be replaced by fossil fuel power plants using coal and liquefied natural gas. Coal will replace hydro as the main source of electricity generation by early 2020, and by 2030, coal-fired plants will generate more than half of Viet Nam's total electricity.

To reassure the public about the possible impact of coal pollution, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, emphasized that the state utility, Viet Nam Electricity, must heed environmental aspects of new power projects and take into account lessons learned from recent industrial pollution incidents such as the 2016 infamous Formosa chemical spill/mass fish death/Hà Tĩnh environmental disaster, and the air and marine pollution from the Vinh Tân coal-fired power plants near the planned site for the first nuclear power plant of Viet Nam.

Experts say that many coal-fired power plants have been equipped with outdated, inefficient, and polluting technologies from China -- cheap investment in the short term but inducing enormous impact on the environment and local communities in the future.

Given the dwindling capacity of hydropower and the limited potential of renewable energy in a country with high population density and strained electricity grid, the budget-constrained Vietnamese government doesn't have many choices for its energy development plan other than coal and natural gas. However, no matter how limited state resources are,

the priority of the government's political agenda should be the welfare of the public -- the first to suffer from the impact of coal pollution.

Conclusion re coal pollution

It is time for Viet Nam's decision-makers to eliminate dirty coal-fired power plants and explore cleaner options for electricity generation. Among these options, zero-emission nuclear power should be reconsidered for the well-being of the Vietnamese people in the future, even though its return is improbable in the short term due to political and economic considerations.

• 3. Environmental Pollution in the Mê Kông Delta

Let us now look southward in Viet Nam to see how its government and people are responding to environmental risks posed by a Chinese-owned giant manufacturing complex and supporting coal-fired thermal power plants stationed along major waterways – the only fresh water supplies to paddy fields and crowded cities in the Mê Kông Delta.

Foreign-owned, highly polluting producers have been approved to operate in eco-agriculturally rich regions in Viet Nam, particularly in its most fertile and vulnerable “rice bowl,” the Mê Kông Delta. While the government commits to green growth, its first priority is the economy.

Familiar dangers have been exposed in the Mê Kông Delta. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of eco-agricultural land have been revoked and replaced by non-sustainable industrial projects, particularly Chinese-owned Lee & Man Paper pulp mill and thermal power plants located along vital waterways in the Delta, such as the Hậu River and Tiền River. The Lee & Man project is thought to have received land use permits without conducting any serious full-scale environmental impact assessment to meet Viet Nam's environment regulations. Environmentalists and farmers living around the Lee & Man manufacturing campus are concerned that this project will pollute the environment in the Delta, making their villages “the next cancer villages in Viet Nam.”

To allay public fears while attracting more foreign investors to maintain economic growth, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc has repeatedly stated his efforts to build a constructive, incorruptible government which will act to serve the people and develop the nation sustainably. Hà Nội has authorized relevant agencies to join forces with local authorities to investigate the Lee & Man project's licensing process, environmental impact assessment reports, wastewater treatment technologies, and its compliance with national construction rules and environmental standards. However, the inspections still haven't been made available -- despite growing public concern.

Water, air, and land pollution have become increasingly serious, particularly at industrial complexes which are often equipped with low-quality technologies imported from China. The pressure to maintain economic growth and compete internationally has made Viet

Nam a facile investment environment that encourages export-processing and labor-intensive industries and requires more and more agricultural lands to be revoked for industrial projects.

To meet the demand from foreign investors — who tend to devote their capital flows to sectors that consume huge amounts of energy and natural resources but are not environmentally friendly — the exploitation of minerals and natural resources and construction of hydropower and thermal power plants have been approved hastily without avenues for concerned citizens to raise their voices on issues of national importance. This further contributes to the Viet Nam’s environmental degradation and proves the substantial trade-off between economic development and environmental protection.

In the Mê Kông Delta, more than 17 million people have completely relied on the waterways’ fish resources and rice production for their subsistence. Pollution has worsened over years of rapid industrialization and economic growth, affecting the living conditions of local people and causing social disorder.

Phạm Thị Thu, a school teacher, tells how her family and neighbors are suffering from water and air pollution emitted by an industrial zone next to their village: “The groundwater is no longer usable and the air is heavily polluted. We always have to keep the doors closed. Most of us have to buy fresh water from a local water plant using water from the same river which the factories are allowed to discharge wastewater into.” She adds, “Factories and guest workers, especially the Chinese, have disturbed and changed the lifestyle in our village. Living standards have improved thanks to new roads opened and urbanization that followed, but urbanization has also resulted in heavy pollution and increased social problems such as crimes and cultural degradation.”

The government has tried to reduce negative effects posed by industrial complexes while fostering administrative reforms and transparency in the public services sector. Some 2,000 under-construction projects, including those in the Mê Kông Delta, have been required to re-make environment impact assessment reports.

The government and the people of Viet Nam both want sustainable development, but the current approach and existing institutions remain problematic and palliative. Scientists at Cần Thơ University are concerned about the increasing environmental pollution posed by a series of industrial projects built around the Mê Kông Delta. The Delta has long been famous for its diverse agricultural strength rather than as an ideal place for industrial activities. “The clearer impacts by upstream dams in the Mê Kông River coupled with the proliferation of factories and other potential polluters in the Delta will pose more threats to its agricultural output.”

There are unique concerns about the Lee & Man Paper pulp mill. “Available wood supply for papermaking in the Mê Kông Delta is quite limited due to nature reserves. Thus, most of materials for the paper mill must come from waste paper and pulp

imported from outside to recycle. As a result, the paper-processing project will increase more potential risks of pollution in the Delta.”

Non-sustainable industrialization in the Delta may eventually result in economic growth, but not economic development — the labor-intensive industrial sector may be growing strongly but it has no linkages with the rest of the local agriculture-based economy, while generating environmental and social unrests in the long run.

In order to make growth more inclusive, Viet Nam has expanded investments in rural areas and promoted foreign-invested labor-intensive manufacturing. Such a move meets the need to reduce the high rate of unemployment in the Mê Kông Delta in the short term. However, the Delta’s inhabitants are understandably wary of the predictable costs of industrial development by all means.

Hà Tĩnh is not the only province in Viet Nam that has suffered from Taiwanese-owned companies’ systematic efforts to elude Viet Nam’s environmental regulations. A decade ago, there was another environmental incident when the Thị Vải River was polluted by the Taiwanese-owned Vedan Company. The repeat of an environmental disaster in Hà Tĩnh, with much larger scale of pollution and more severe impacts, reveals that a legacy of simultaneous environmental neglect is becoming glaringly evident. Viet Nam’s environmental protection law remains overwhelmed by economic considerations.

Prior to 2016, with almost 90 percent of its population engaged in agriculture and fishery, public protests were uncommon in the Mê Kông Delta. However, now ordinary people are becoming more vocal and there is angst over the dangers threatening the eco-agriculturally rich Delta. Civil disobedience is likely to turn into worse actions if the state authorities fail to thoroughly address public concerns as well as connect citizen interests to a broader view of the country’s development process.

Conclusion re: environmental pollution in the Mê Kông Delta

If Viet Nam’s long-term strategic goal is for a flourishing Mê Kông Delta characterized by sustainable economic development, biodiversity, and ongoing civil obedience, the government must realize its commitment to green growth and transparency improvement, which will affect the flow of foreign direct investment, especially from China and Taiwan. Although it’s a difficult choice, Hà Nội needs to evaluate whether the short-term gains in industrializing the Mê Kông Delta really serve its long-term socio-economic goals.

Thank you.

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