



Amnesty International

Group 524

September 2019



Next Meeting: Tuesday, September 17 – 7:00 p.m. – Providence Heights

Vietnam: Additional Prisoner Case Received from AIUSA

For several months, our group's case coordinator, Kathy Herbst, has been communicating with officials of Amnesty USA, pursuing our request to take on an additional prisoner case. That request has been approved, and Kathy has now received the case documentation for a Vietnamese prisoner of conscience named **Tran Thi Nga**. She prepared this introductory paragraph about our new prisoner:

Tran Thi Nga is a Prisoner of Conscience, sentenced to nine years imprisonment in 2017, to be followed by five years of house arrest. She was a prominent activist in the aftermath of the environmental disaster caused by the industrial waste spill at the Formosa Steel plant. She took part in demonstrations in Hanoi and used social media to urge the government to help local communities. In response, she was arrested for her "propaganda against the state."

Our first action on this case will be a letter to the prime minister, which Kathy will bring to our September 17th meeting, in the form of a petition. We are then going to feature that letter as a writing opportunity in the October newsletter.

Banned Books Week

More than 30 years ago, the American Library Association initiated Banned Books Week, an action that takes place every September. The event celebrates the freedom to read, and calls attention to attempts to ban books from schools and libraries. Human rights groups, including Amnesty, complement the event with actions supporting people around the world who have been imprisoned, threatened, or murdered because of what they wrote or published or because of their work in the publishing or media industries. In this issue, we have two cases from an impressive packet that AIUSA sent out for Banned Books Week.

Write for Rights 2019

This Group 39 event is scheduled for **Monday, December 9th**. Save the date!

Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.
Meeting Location: Providence Heights
9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Warren (jf.warren@verizon.net or 412-766-2506) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA website (www.amnestyusa.org) or the website of Amnesty International Group 39 (amnestypgh.org).

Banned Books Week: 2019 Cases

In this issue, as noted on Page 1, we are featuring two of the eleven cases in the AIUSA packet. The other nine cases are summarized below, and on the next page.



<https://www.indexoncensorship.org>

Akram Aylisli – Azerbaijan – Novelist – Persecuted because of Book – Facing 3 Years in Prison – Books Burned

The 81-year-old writer had previously been awarded the official title of People's Writer, as well as two of the highest state awards in Azerbaijan. After the 2013 publication of *Stone Dreams*, Aylisli was stripped of his titles and medals and the President signed a decree stripping him of his presidential pension; his books were also burnt, and a politician from a pro-government party reportedly offered a US \$13K reward to anyone who cut off one of his ears.



<https://www.amnesty.org.hk>

Wei Zhili – China – Reporter working on Labor & Migrant Worker Rights – Detained since March 2017

Wei Zhili is the editor of "New Generation" (*xinshengdai*), a website which monitors and reports on labor conditions and internal migrant workers in China. In March he was arrested amid a crackdown on student activists, labor activists, factory workers and others supporting a growing labor rights movement. His wife has been harassed & her web accounts suspended.



<https://www.iranhumanrights.org>

Sanaz Alahyari and Amirhossein Mohammadifar – Iran – Journalists Detained – Facing Charges

Iranian journalists Sanaz Alahyari and Amirhossein Mohammadifar are staff members of *Gam*, an online magazine that reports on social justice issues, including labor rights. These Prisoners of Conscience have been detained since January 2019, along with journalist Amir Amirgholi, solely in connection with their reporting on the protests of workers at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company in Khuzestan province over grievances concerning unpaid wages.



<https://www.es.amnesty.org>

Mustafa al-Kharouf – Israel/Occupied Territories – Photojournalist – Stateless – Arbitrarily Detained – Facing Deportation

32 year old photojournalist has been detained since January 2019; he is facing deportation from Israel and subsequent family separation despite 20 year residency. As photojournalist for Anadolu Agency, he has been reporting on human rights violations committed by Israeli forces. Amnesty International fears that al-Kharouf's arbitrary detention and the decision to deport him are intended to stop his journalistic work.



Journalists – Mexico – 10 Murdered in 2019 – Several in direct relation to their work

Francisco Romero Díaz, Norma Sarabia Garduza, and Rafael Murúa Manríquez

Death is an occupational hazard for journalists in Mexico, where more than 150 have been killed or disappeared since 2000. In 2019 the killing of journalists continues unabated.

Banned Books Week: 2019 Cases (continued)



Maria Ressa – Philippines – Executive Editor of Online News Agency – Repeatedly Detained & Facing Years in Prison

Ressa currently faces 8 court cases, while the directors and staff of *Rappler*, the online news agency she leads, face 11 charges. These prosecutions are part of a campaign to silence critics of the government. Since President Rodrigo Duterte was elected, media outlet *Rappler* has consistently drawn attention to the deadly reality of the ‘war on drugs,’ and the thousands of unlawful killings of poor and marginalized people perpetrated in its name. Its persistence in documenting these abuses has attracted the wrath of the Philippine authorities.



Oleg Sentsov – Russia – Filmmaker & Essayist – Sentenced to 20 Years

Oleg Sentsov is a Ukrainian film director sentenced 20 years imprisonment in 2015 for allegedly setting up a branch of a ‘terrorist group’. Sentsov faced trial in Russia, despite being arrested in Crimea and being a Ukrainian citizen. As a filmmaker, he is best known for his film *Gamer* as well as his short films. Sentsov won the 2017 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award.



Loujain Al-Hathloul – Saudi Arabia – Social Media Commentator – Detained Since May 2018

In May 2018, activist and social media commentator Loujain Al-Hathloul was arrested in light of her advocacy for women’s rights. Loujain spent the first 3 months of her arbitrary detention incommunicado and was subject to torture, sexual abuse, and other forms of ill-treatment. She remains in prison pending the next court session.



Ahmet Altan – Novelist & Journalist – Detained since 2016 & Facing up to 15 Years – Turkey

Ahmet Altan is a prominent novelist, essayist, and journalist. On September 10, 2016, Altan was arrested as part of a wave of arrests of thinkers and writers. He has been accused of giving subliminal messages to rally coup supporters on a TV broadcast before the 2016 coup attempt. (Pen America)

Banned Books Week: 2019 Cases – China

This case is similar to the case we featured in our August newsletter. In both situations, China is attempting to put pressure on a prominent person in the Uighur community in exile by imprisoning members of that person's family.

Hankezi Zikeli

AUNT OF US-BASED UYGHUR JOURNALIST GULCHEHRA HOJA - CHINA AT RISK OF TORTURE



Gulchehra Hoja is one of the most well-known Uighur journalists, having been a star of a children's program in the 1990's and then later working for Xinjiang TV. Since moving to the USA about 18 years ago, she has worked at Radio Free Asia's Uighur Service, which is one of the only outlets providing independent news about the situation in the XUAR. Independent reporting in the XUAR is extremely difficult, and foreign reporters face numerous restrictions and harassment by the authorities. According to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China's annual report for working conditions in China from 2017, 73% of foreign correspondents who took the FCCC's survey who travelled to the XUAR in 2017 were told by officials and security agents that reporting was prohibited or restricted, compared with 42% in 2016.

Following the news of Gulchehra Hoja's family, it was reported by the Washington Post on 28 February 2018 that three other journalists at Radio Free Asia's Uighur service faced the same situation, with their family members in the XUAR detained in apparent retaliation for their relatives' overseas journalism. Gulchehra Hoja's parents were also among her detained relatives. They were released shortly afterwards in March 2018 but remain under surveillance.

While Uighurs and other predominately Muslim ethnic minorities in the XUAR have long suffered violations of their rights to freedom of religion and association and other human rights, over the past year or more, authorities have engaged in an unprecedented crackdown targeting them. Techniques of repression include the widespread use of arbitrary detention, technological surveillance, heavily armed street patrols, security checkpoints and an array of intrusive policies violating human rights.

There have been numerous reports that Chinese authorities in the XUAR have effectively sidestepped the procedural protections afforded to criminal defendants under Chinese law. Many Uighur detainees have been denied legal counsel, and in addition to the widespread use of administrative detention. There are reports that, in some places, police have been given the authority to directly sentence individuals to prison terms, bypassing the courts.

Testimonies collected by Amnesty International, media reports as well as information gathered by Amnesty International, indicate that in the spring of 2017, authorities throughout the region began detaining Uighurs en masse, and started sending them to administrative detention facilities or sentencing them to long prison terms. This crackdown has not only been applied to Uighurs, but to other predominantly Muslim ethnicities, such as Kazakhs, and Kyrgyzs.



Banned Books Week: 2019 Cases – China (continued)

Here is a model letter, adapted from one in the Banned Books Week packet.

Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Chen Quanguo
479 Zhongshan Lu
Wulumuqi Shi, Xinjiang
People's Republic of China

Dear Secretary Chen:

Hankezi Zikeli, 64, has suffered a nervous breakdown after having been detained in a “transformation through education” center in Urumqi since February 2018. She is an aunt of Gulchehra Hoja, a Washington-based Radio Free Asia Uyghur Service journalist, and one of her 25 relatives who have been detained for more than one year. According to a relative in the XUAR, who was told by a local police officer, Hankezi Zikeli has not spoken for several months and spends her day staring at the ceiling.

Gulchehra Hoja learned in early 2018 that her relatives had all been detained in “transformation through education” centers in Urumqi and Yili in the XUAR after being linked to a WeChat group with her. Other than this distressing news about her aunt Hankezi Zikeli, Gulchehra Hoja has had no updates about the situation of her brother Kaiser Keyum and other relatives.

I am concerned about Hankezi Zikeli and Gulchehra Hoja's other relatives' safety in the facilities as they do not have access to a lawyer of their own choice, or to their family members, and thus they are at risk of torture or other ill-treatment.

Therefore, I call on you, Secretary Chen, to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Hankezi Zikeli, along with all Gulchehra Hoja's other relatives, unless there is sufficient credible and admissible evidence that they have committed an internationally recognized offence. In any such cases, the individual must be granted a fair trial in line with international standards.
- Ensure that Hankezi Zikeli and Gulchehra Hoja's other relatives are not subjected to any torture or other ill-treatment and have regular and unrestricted access to a lawyer of their choice. They must be able to communicate with family members and others, including with family members living in other countries, without interference, unless justified in line with international human rights law.

Banned Books Week: 2019 Cases – Vietnam

We featured this case in our June newsletter, and since then we have signed a petition on it during each of our monthly meetings.

Nguyen Van Hoa

VIETNAM - ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTER / CATHOLIC ADVOCATE & VLOGGER

SENTENCED TO 7 YEARS - TORTURED TO CONFESS



Photo From: <https://www.rfa.org> (Radio Free Asia)

Nguyen Van Hoa is a young Catholic vlogger from Ha Tinh province who assisted fishermen's families in demanding compensation and justice for the [Formosa environmental disaster](#) of industrial waste dumped into the sea (2016). [A digital security trainer and regular contributor to Radio Free Asia, Hoa's live broadcast of footage of peaceful protests](#) went viral.

Hoa is serving a seven-year sentence handed down in a one-day trial on November 2017 on charges under article 88 of the penal code, an anti-state provision that carries a maximum 20-year prison term for "propagandizing" against the state, according to [news reports](#) and [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\) research](#). He was beaten into making a forced confession to convict environmental activist Le Dinh Luong, which Hoa retracted later in court, according to [news reports](#). During his time at An Diem prison, the authorities never succeeded in forcing Nguyen Van Hoa to admit the charges against him.

In August 20, 2018, the CPJ condemned the abuse and called on Vietnamese authorities to stop beating and harassing jailed journalists. "Vietnamese authorities must stop immediately their harassment and abuse of reporter Nguyen Van Hoa," said Shawn Crispin, CPJ's Southeast Asia representative. "Instead of beating jailed journalists into making false confessions, Vietnamese authorities should free all journalists behind bars, reform the laws that put them there, and hold to account those who abused their power to commit this assault."

Hoa is being held in solitary confinement as punishment for his complaints regarding prison conditions and treatment.



Banned Books Week: 2019 Cases – Vietnam (continued)

Here is a model letter, adapted from one in the Banned Books Week packet.

Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc
Số 16, Lê Hồng Phong,
Bà Đình,
Hanoi
Vietnam

Your Excellency:

I am writing to express my concern about the treatment of **Nguyen Van Hoa**, a journalist and human rights defender who has been imprisoned solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression.

Currently held in An Diem Prison, Nguyen Van Hoa has been tortured by prison officials in an attempt to force him to admit his “crime”. After refusing to cooperate, he was placed in solitary confinement on 12 May and has remained there ever since.

Nguyen Van Hoa was arrested in January 2017, after covering a public demonstration on the Formosa Steel environmental disaster. He was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison on the charge of “conducting propaganda against the state”.

Vietnam is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention Against Torture. The Constitution of Viet Nam also explicitly bans the use of torture and other ill-treatment. As a result, the Vietnamese government is obligated to end the use of torture by its law enforcement officials, as well as to promptly and effectively investigate allegations of torture and bring to justice anyone suspected to be responsible.

Specifically, I urge you to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Nguyen Van Hoa, who is a prisoner of conscience. He has been imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.
- Pending his release, ensure Nguyen Van Hoa is protected from torture and other ill-treatment while in prison. There must be a prompt and impartial investigation into allegations of torture.



Vietnam: Update of Formosa Steel Environmental Disaster

Both **Nguyen Van Hoa** and our new prisoner, **Tran Thi Nga**, have been imprisoned in Vietnam because of their activities in behalf of victims of the toxic chemical spill by Formosa Steel in 2016. In June 2019, a French press agency published this report on a recent development in that case.

Victims of Formosa Spill in Vietnam Seek Compensation

Lawyers in Taiwan launched a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the industrial conglomerate Formosa on Tuesday, on behalf of thousands of Vietnamese whose livelihoods were ruined by a toxic spill that devastated fish stocks.

Formosa's huge steel plant in Ha Tinh province was fined \$500 million by the Vietnamese government in 2016 for pouring chemicals – including cyanide – into the ocean, sparking one of the country's worst environmental catastrophes. The spill devastated fishing communities along swathes of coastline and prompted months of rare protests in the one-party state.

Dozens of local and Vietnamese activists rallied outside the district court in Taipei this week as lawyers lodged their claim.

"I saw with my own eyes dead fish floating in the sea. There are no fish in the ocean to catch now... we are forced to leave our home to go to other countries to find work," said Nguyen, a former fisherman who asked to be identified only by his family name. "I hope Taiwan's independent judiciary will seriously handle the case to return justice to the victims and I hope Formosa will give Vietnam back a clean ocean so the fish will return," he added.

Some 7,875 people from the affected areas have joined the group lawsuit initially seeking at least \$4.46 million in compensation, according to Taiwan's Environmental Rights Foundation, which is assisting the victims. They also hope that the lawsuit will help shed some light into how the \$500 million fine has been used to clean up the environment, due to a lack of information in authoritarian Vietnam.

Activists said that even though the pollution occurred in Vietnam, Taiwan's court has the jurisdiction because the defendants – board members and major shareholders of Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation – are mostly Taiwanese. "This is the first case filed against a Taiwanese company for causing massive environmental impact abroad. We hope the court will take the challenge to handle the case and set a good precedent," said Tu Yu-wen, head of the foundation.

The company said in a statement it paid \$500 million to compensate fishermen in August 2016, to be distributed by the Vietnamese government. But activists said only "some people" received compensation and that the Vietnamese government has jailed people who demanded greater compensation.

The toxic spill set off angry demonstrations against the company. Several activists were arrested and convicted for their involvement in the protests.

Formosa's \$11-billion steel plant, which was under construction at the time of the disaster, was given the green light to resume operations in April 2017 after officials found it had addressed dozens of violations.

However, the company was fined for a second time – an additional \$25,000 – in December 2017 for illegally burying "harmful" solid waste in the ground the year before.