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VIETNAM | International Call for Release of Lawyer

Members of parliament from around the world sent an open letter to Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc on Oct. 24 calling on the government in Hanoi to immediately and unconditionally release Vietnamese lawyer Nguyễn Văn Đài and his assistant Lê Thu Hà.

“We are pleased to note that Vietnam is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits arbitrary detention, guarantees the right to a fair trial, and stipulates that detainees be treated with humanity and respect for their dignity. In line with these provisions, we the undersigned parliamentarians respectfully request that the Vietnamese Government urgently reviews the cases of Nguyễn Văn Đài and Lê Thu Hà,” the letter states.

The letter was initiated by Marie-Luise Dött, Member of German Bundestag and signed by 73 parliamentarians from 14 countries on four continents. Organizations involved with the letter — VETO! Human Rights Defenders Network, ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), and Christian Solidarity Worldwide — welcomed its delivery and called on the Vietnamese government to comply with its requests.

“Nguyễn Văn Đài and Lê Thu Hà were providing a valuable public service by defending the rights of their fellow citizens. The charges against them should be dropped and they should be allowed to freely exercise their rights. Their continued imprisonment constitutes a black mark on Vietnam’s human rights record and its international credibility,” said APHR Chairperson Charles Santiago, a member of the Malaysian Parliament who signed the letter.

Đài was arrested in Hanoi on Dec. 16, 2015, along with his assistant, Hà, on charges of “conducting propaganda against the State” under Article 88 of the country’s Penal Code. If convicted, Đài and Hà could each face up to 20 years in prison.

Đài is one of the best-known human rights activists in Vietnam and previously spent four years in prison and four years under house arrest as a result of his human rights work. Shortly before

his arrest in December 2015, he was abducted and beaten after organizing a training on the rights of Vietnamese citizens according to the Constitution. Prior to her arrest, Hà was arrested and interrogated in connection with her work for Conscience TV, a YouTube channel which reported on social justice issues.

“Nguyễn Văn Đài has spent over 15 years providing legal advice to vulnerable social groups including religious minorities. He has been at the forefront of those peacefully advocating for democratic reform and the protection of human rights. These detentions underscore the fact that citizens of Vietnam are still not free to fully exercise their human rights and to advocate for the rights of others”, said Benedict Rogers, East Asia Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

In addition to calling for the immediate and unconditional release of both Đài and Hà, parliamentarians urged Vietnamese authorities to ensure that the conditions to which they are subject in detention comply with international standards, and to guarantee that they have access to legal counsel.

“The broad international support for this case shows the consent to the universality of human rights. Nobody can turn cold shoulder when a human rights defender is arrested and held incommunicado for nearly a year. We hope the Vietnamese government will heed the word of these law makers and immediately release Mr. Đài and Ms. Thu Hà who have done nothing but exercise their basic rights according to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Vietnam is a state party,” said Vu Quoc Dung, Executive Director of VETO! Human Rights Defenders Network.