

Press Releases: Conviction of Peaceful Activists

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

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The United States is deeply troubled that a Vietnamese court has convicted and sentenced peaceful labor and environmental activist Hoang Duc Binh and Nguyen Nam Phong to fourteen years and two years in prison, respectively, under vague articles of the Penal code.

All people have the right to the fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

Mr. Binh and Mr. Phong's convictions are the sixth such verdicts over the past week alone of individuals peacefully expressing their views. They are among many individuals convicted this past year for exercising basic rights, including Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh (aka "Mother Mushroom") and Tran Thi Nga. The trend of increased arrests, convictions, and harsh sentences of peaceful activists since early 2016 is very concerning.

The United States calls on Vietnam to release all prisoners of conscience immediately, and to allow all individuals in Vietnam to express their views freely and assemble peacefully without fear of retribution.

We also urge the Vietnamese government to ensure its actions and laws, including the Penal Code, are consistent with the human rights provisions of Vietnam's constitution and its international obligations and commitments.

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:40 p.m. EST

MS NAUERT: Hi, everybody. How are you? Good to see you. I didn't know that you were here today. I thought there was no one from the AP, and I thought, where do we start when we don't have somebody with the AP? And here you are. (Laughter.) We were just having that debate back there.

Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us. Great to see you all. I'd like to start this briefing today with a colleague of mine from the Department of Defense. Amber Smith is over here, and she has some information to bring you, and then we'll take a couple of your questions, if you do have questions, about this particular initiative that she's going to be announcing.

She is the deputy assistant secretary of defense for outreach. She's joining us today to discuss the DOD's campaign called This is Your Military. It's a new DOD initiative aimed at connecting the American public with the military by showing them a unique view into the lives of those who are currently serving our country.

We will highlight, and she will highlight, the hard work of the 7,000 veterans who currently are employed by the Department of State. The initiative will focus on our Marine security guards who protect our embassies worldwide, the National Guard and the reservists, and the approximately 7,000 veterans that the State Department employs around the world. DOD will produce videos to be released as part of an initiative that showcases the National Guard, reservists, veteran success stories who work with the Department of State.

Amber is a senior advisor to the Secretary of Defense for matters related to strategic outreach, community relations, stakeholder engagement, entertainment series, and special outreach events. She also

coordinates digital and social media. She's also very humble; she was a Kiowa pilot, and she served in both Iraq and Afghanistan for our country. So she was in the military; now she serves as a civilian, much like many of our State Department colleagues who serve here in a civilian capacity. And of course, then we have our colleagues who serve in the Marine Corps protecting our embassies.

So with that, I'll introduce you to Amber, and then we'll go ahead with the regular briefing. Amber, thanks.

MS SMITH: Thank you, Heather. Good afternoon. Today, fewer Americans have a direct connection to those who serve in the military. Research shows that the civ-military divide is continuing to expand, which threatens the viability and the sustainability of the all-volunteer force, which poses some long-term national security risks. This Is Your Military is a Department of Defense outreach initiative that will educate and inform the American public while introducing them – the less than 1 percent of Americans who are currently serving in the military – to the 99 percent who are not.

We also want to show how the military is relevant to Americans in their daily lives and for future generations, as well as how we are a force for good. We look forward to collaborating with the Department of State by highlighting the Marine security guards that protect our embassies worldwide, the National Guard, the reservists, and the nearly 7,000 veterans that the department employs around the world, who are all a part of the This Is Your Military story.

The initiative will showcase the real lives of those who are serving in the military and correct common misperceptions that exist today. We will encourage Americans to learn about the military's missions, our capabilities, who is serving, and why they serve. Each month will focus on specific themes. We will release 10 to 15 videos per month on social media that give a behind-the-scenes look into military life. We will have increased coverage of live events as they relate to the military and will collaborate with our external partners to reach an audience that is not normally connected to the military.

We hope you will follow along at #KnowYourMil, @DoDOutreach, and knowyourmilitary.osd.mil.

I'll take any questions if anybody has anything.

MS NAUERT: Any questions?

QUESTION: What's the budget for this (inaudible)?

MS SMITH: So we're using existing resources out of the Department of Defense public affairs outreach office. So we're just realigning our efforts and tailoring our products to reach a different audience. So it's all a part of the existing outreach office within the Department of Defense.

QUESTION: What are you going to spend on it?

MS SMITH: We don't have a specific number. It's existing resources as we use – that we get given in the budget every year.

QUESTION: And you're working for Afghanistan? Could you please give me some details? Because Heather mentioned Afghanistan's name, a program for Afghanistan.

MS SMITH: I think she was mentioning that I served in Afghanistan in the Army, but we'll be highlighting service members who have served in Afghanistan or will serve in Afghanistan in the future as well.

MS NAUERT: Thanks, everybody.

MS SMITH: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Thanks, Amber. Thanks for coming across the river.

Okay. I'd like to start now by giving you an update on the Secretary's trip to Latin America and also the Caribbean. The Secretary is in the region to promote a safe, prosperous, energy-secure, and democratic hemisphere. He's also advocating for increased regional attention to the crisis in Venezuela. This morning in Peru he met with the president and also the foreign minister to discuss our strategic partnership, support for the restoration of democracy in Venezuela, and preparations for the 2018 Summit of the Americas.

The Secretary is now in Bogota, Colombia – he just landed a few minutes ago, as a matter of fact – where he will be meeting with the president and also the foreign minister and other senior officials from the government.

His focus is on the UN support – U.S. support for a just and lasting peace in Colombia, our partnership to address the surge in coca and cocaine production, and the peace accord. In addition, he'll discuss the growing number of migrants from – pardon me, from Venezuela who fled due to humanitarian, political, and economic crisis in their country.

Tomorrow the Secretary will meet with the prime minister and foreign minister in Kingston, Jamaica, where he will be headed next. He will underscore the U.S. commitment to the Caribbean 2020 strategy and discuss energy security and Jamaica's successful economic reform efforts.

In addition to that, the Vice President, as many of you know, is on his way to Japan today. The Vice President will lead the U.S. presidential delegation to the Winter Olympics in Korea to demonstrate U.S. commitment to the universal values of the Olympic Games and the values that they promote. Vice President Pence will attend the Opening Ceremony on February the 9th along with the Second Lady of the United States Karen Pence, Congressman Ed Royce, General Vincent Brooks, General James D. Thurman, our charge d'affaires from our embassy in Seoul Marc

Knapper, and 2002 Olympic Gold Medalist Sarah Hughes. The Vice President looks forward to cheering on Team USA and the athletes and also the para-athletes representing our country and making America proud. He looks forward to personally congratulating the many young athletes who will bring medals back to their families and friends across this great land. His visit will further demonstrate the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance and underscore the importance of the maximum pressure campaign all around the world against the DPRK and the regime. He will also remind the world of the humanitarian rights abuses – the humanitarian rights abuses that are well-documented.

We encourage all Americans traveling abroad to enroll in our Smart Traveler Enrollment Program – that is our STEP program – by visiting travel.state.gov, where they can also find useful travel information for the Olympics or in any other international destination they may be visiting.

And finally, I'd like to turn to Turkey, and that is where we'd like to say that the United States is deeply troubled by the February 1 rearrest by Turkish authorities of the Amnesty International Turkey chairman, Taner Kilic. He's been in pretrial detention since June of 2017. We're closely following his case along with those against other respected human rights defenders, journalists, civil society leaders, and opposition politicians whose ongoing prosecution under the state of emergency has chilled freedom of expression and raises serious concerns about respect for judicial independence and the due process protections enshrined in the Turkish constitution.

We call on the Turkish Government to end the protracted state of emergency, to release those detained arbitrarily under the emergency authorities, and to safeguard the rule of law consistent with Turkey's own domestic and international obligations and commitments.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

QUESTION: Thanks, Heather. I guess why don't we start on the North Korea issue. Both the Secretary and the Vice President have suggested that if something sort of came about spontaneously in PyeongChang that it's possible there could be some type of dialogue. And I'm curious; given that there's not a State Department presence on that trip, what would that look like? How – how prepared is the Vice President – how far is he prepared to go, and what would be sort of the limitations for what they would discuss, if that were to happen?

MS NAUERT: So I can't speak for the Vice President. I can't speak for the White House. I can only say – well, a couple things. One, our charge d'affaires will be there as a part of the official delegation. Marc Knapper will be there. But there are no plans to meet with any North Korean officials during or after the Olympics; I want to be clear about that. There are no plans to do so. The Secretary and the Vice President said we'll see what happens when we get to the Olympics and when he's in the – when the Vice President is in the region.

There is no shift in U.S. policy regarding this. North Korea must, once and for all, abandon its desire for nuclear weapons and also for ballistic missiles. Do away with that desire, stop, and then perhaps we'd be willing to come to the table and have a conversation with them about it.

QUESTION: So when you say –

QUESTION: I have something else, but if you want to do North Korea, then we can circle back.

MS NAUERT: Go ahead. Okay.

QUESTION: But when you say we'll see what happens, what does that dependent upon? Is it dependent upon North Korea's behavior while at the Olympics? Or when you talk about a sustained show of no provocation, that seems like that would span a greater time than the Olympics anyway. So what are you waiting and seeing?

MS NAUERT: I can just tell you that that is what the Vice President said and that's what the Secretary said, and we're on the same page. So I'm not going to get ahead of any of the Vice President's meetings that he'll have in Japan or in South Korea or any of that. I'll just let his words stand for themselves.

QUESTION: Well, could you explain maybe, like are they – what is it based on? "We'll see what happens." What happens with what?

MS NAUERT: Yep, I'm going to leave it. I'm going to leave it at that with what the Vice President, also the Secretary, had to say. Okay.

QUESTION: But Heather, do you mean that the U.S. and the Vice President would consider a demand from the North Koreans to have a meeting?

MS NAUERT: I've just said we have –

QUESTION: I mean, they're not asking –

MS NAUERT: We have no plans to do so, and our policy hasn't changed.

QUESTION: But they would consider a demand from the North Koreans to meet?

MS NAUERT: I have no specifics and we've been given no specifics on any individuals. Okay.

QUESTION: Heather, if I'm not mistaken, if Vice President Pence were to have some kind of dealings with the North Korean on this trip, he would be the second-highest U.S. – serving U.S. Government official ever to have done so. The highest was Bill Clinton in the fall of 2000. Why on Earth would you want the second-ranking official in the U.S. Government to meet with a country with which you have so many disagreements? Why would you start with your number-two official; why wouldn't you just

rule that out?

MS NAUERT: We have no plans to meet with North Korea during the Olympics or after the Olympics. We have no plans to do so.

QUESTION: Right, but you haven't ruled it out. In fact, you very clearly dangled the possibility by failing to rule it out. And I still don't understand why you would want or even be willing to entertain the possibility of the number-two official in the U.S. Government meeting with North Koreans, given how many disagreements you have.

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to get ahead of the Vice President and his meetings. The Vice President has a full series of meetings both in Japan and in the Republic of Korea, and I'm not going to get ahead of those. So I'll leave it at that. Okay?

Okay. Go right ahead. Hi.

QUESTION: Say, Heather, given that it appears to be a message since both gentlemen said – used exactly the same wording, is the State Department considering sending out someone from EAP just to have someone on site to give advice just in case it could come in handy in any way?

MS NAUERT: Not that I'm – not that I am aware of. Okay.

QUESTION: Can we move on?

QUESTION: South Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Okay. Let's – what did you have? Anything else on DPRK, South Korea, something?

QUESTION: Yes, please.

QUESTION: South Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Go right ahead.

QUESTION: Do you have a comment or reaction to the video posted by Sol Kim, the son of Tony Kim, one of the Americans who's been detained in North Korea? And also, do you know that his family is saying that the last contact had with them was in June? Can you confirm that?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So the video that you're referring to is of an American who's been detained in North Korea. And this is a good reminder to all Americans that you should not go to North Korea; it is not a safe place to go to. The safety and the wellbeing of American citizens is one of our top, top issues at the State Department. You may recall last year that our Ambassador Yun, Ambassador Joe Yun, had visited with three Americans when he was in North Korea and was able to visit them. Mr. Kim is one of them that he was able to see. That is the last time that we have made contact with Mr. Kim. From our understanding here, that is the last time that either the United States or Sweden, our protecting power

there since we don't have diplomatic relations with North Korea, has been able to see these three Americans who are being detained. Okay.

QUESTION: Can we move on?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Yeah, sure. Hi, Said.