Dear Ambassador,

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights ("CCHR") would like to express grave concern regarding the case of fourteen Vietnamese bloggers, who were sentenced on 9 January 2013 to jail terms ranging from three to thirteen years after a two-day trial at the People’s Court in Nghe An province in Vietnam. Human Rights Watch has identified the fourteen as Dang Ngoc Minh, Dang Xuan Dieu, Ho Duc Hoa, Ho Van Oanh, Le Van Son, Nguyen Dang Minh Man, Nguyen Dang Vinh Phuc, Nguyen Dinh Cuong, Nguyen Van Duyet, Nguyen Van Oai, Nguyen Xuan Oanh, Nong Hung Anh, Thai Van Dung, and Tran Minh Nhat. The fourteen were charged after attending a training course in Bangkok, Thailand, held by the outlawed California-based Viet Tan organization (or Vietnam Reform Party), which has, since the 1980s, stated its commitment to peaceful political reform, democracy and human rights in Vietnam. Of the fourteen, eleven were charged with being Viet Tan members, and three with actively participating in the organization. In sentencing the fourteen, the courts relied upon Article 79 of Vietnam’s penal code, which ambiguously prohibits activities aimed at “overthrowing the government”.

The charging and sentencing of the fourteen is a violation of their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information. Both rights are protected under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (the “ICCPR”) to which Vietnam acceded in 1982, and under Article 69 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which guarantees the freedoms of opinion, speech, press and the right to be informed. Twelve of the fourteen are also members of the Roman Catholic minority in Vietnam, affiliated with the Redemptorist Thai Ha church in Hanoi and Ky Dong church in Ho Chi Minh City, which are known for strongly backing bloggers and other peaceful
religious and human rights activists. We are also concerned, therefore, about the state of non-discrimination rights for religious minorities in Vietnam, which are legally protected by Article 27 of the ICCPR.

These charges come on the heel of a series of convictions that testify to an increasing crackdown on the freedoms of expression, information and online freedoms in Vietnam. Vietnamese songwriters, Vo Minh Tri and Tran Vu AnhBinh, were jailed in October 2012, and three Vietnamese pro-democracy bloggers – Nguyen Van PhanHai, ThanhHai and Ta Phong Tan – were jailed in August 2012. Furthermore, the prosecution’s condemnation of the online activity of the fourteen signals the precarious state of human rights relating to the internet in Vietnam. On 6 July 2012 the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a new resolution on The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet. The purpose of the resolution is to affirm that human rights and freedoms also apply online. Judicial harassment of free speech activists in Vietnam who use the internet as a medium contravenes international trends to protect online freedoms and to promote social media as a means of healthy debate. Also contrary to international trends is the Vietnamese government’s intention to adopt a new Decree on Management, Provision, and Use of Internet Services and Information on the Network, which will strengthen the apparatus to censor and criminalize online expression.

To demonstrate commitment to freedom of expression, information and online freedoms, CCHR calls upon your Embassy to do all in its power to pressure the Vietnamese judiciary to overturn the verdict in this case and to have the fourteen bloggers immediately and unconditionally released – in accordance with international law and Vietnamese domestic law. We should like to make you aware that CCHR will release this letter to local and international media on 14 January 2013.

Yours sincerely,

Ony Virak
President
Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
Phnom Penh, Cambodia