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## **Vietnam Land Dispute Trial Terminates in Guilty Verdicts**

**After earlier signs of leniency, the Vietnamese authorities used the Dong Tam trial to send a strong message.**

By Sebastian Strangio

Vietnam's long-running Dong Tam land dispute has come to an end with a court finding 29 villagers guilty of resisting state authority following a deadly clash with police in January. On September 14, judges in the capital Hanoi handed down death sentences for brothers Le Dinh Chuc and Le Dinh Cong, who were charged with murder over the deaths of three police officers during the incident. The 27 other defendants have been given a range of lesser prison sentences, ranging from 15 months to life.

The verdict marks a sorry milestone in the saga of Dong Tam, a village south of Hanoi, where locals have spent the past three years resisting the government's attempts to build an airfield on land adjacent to the village. The community claims that around 47 hectares of its land was unfairly appropriated on behalf of Viettel Group, Vietnam's military-run communications company.

The dispute escalated in the early hours of January 9, when around 3,000 police personnel were deployed to Dong Tam. In the ensuing clashes, three policemen were killed by petrol bombs, after falling into a concrete shaft. During the raid, police also shot and killed Le Dinh Kinh, 84, a former police chief and father of the two men sentenced to death, who had led the local community in the fight for its land.

The Dong Tam case highlights the increasing tensions that surround the question of land in Vietnam. Carl Thayer of the University of New South Wales has described the Dong Tam raid and resulting trial as the "culmination of 40 years of problems" over land distribution. Specifically, much of the problem comes down to the blurring of public and private interests within Vietnam's hybrid system of "market socialism."

In Vietnam all land is technically owned by the state. As Toan Le of Monash University noted in these pages in April, a Land Law passed in 1993 granted land-use rights to private individuals, but also allowed the government to take land for "public interest" purposes. This was subsequently broadened out to encompass vaguely defined "economic development purposes" and "socio-economic development purposes." The result has been increasing disagreements over compensation that often lead to prolonged disputes.

The verdicts also indicate the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV's) determination to stamp out any stirring of agrarian unrest. While the state reacted with surprising leniency in April 2017, when the villagers of Dong Tam took 38 local officials and policemen hostage in retaliation for

the arrest of Le Dinh Kinh, the trial marks a ruthless and severe turn. Prior to the start of trial, the Ministry of Propaganda sent directives to all state-run media to describe the 29 defendants as “first attackers” and to paint the deceased Kinh as “a degenerate party member” who got what he deserved. In a recent statement, Public Security Ministry spokesman To An Xo smeared him as a “new type of wicked landlord.”

David Brown, a former U.S. diplomat and Vietnam watcher, has suggested this merciless response to the Dong Tam clashes was an attempt to clean up the mess from the aborted and massively disproportionate January operation: “When the operation miscarried leaving three officers dead, Vietnam’s top management concurred in covering up police blunders and, however threadbare their story, in proceeding with a show trial.”

The rise in land disputes poses a particularly thorny challenge for the CPV, which drew considerable support from disenfranchised peasants during its long march to power. Pending substantial reforms to Vietnam’s complex system of land management, the situation is likely to breed more worry and desperation: the same steely resistance that the communist cause once evoked, turned against it.