

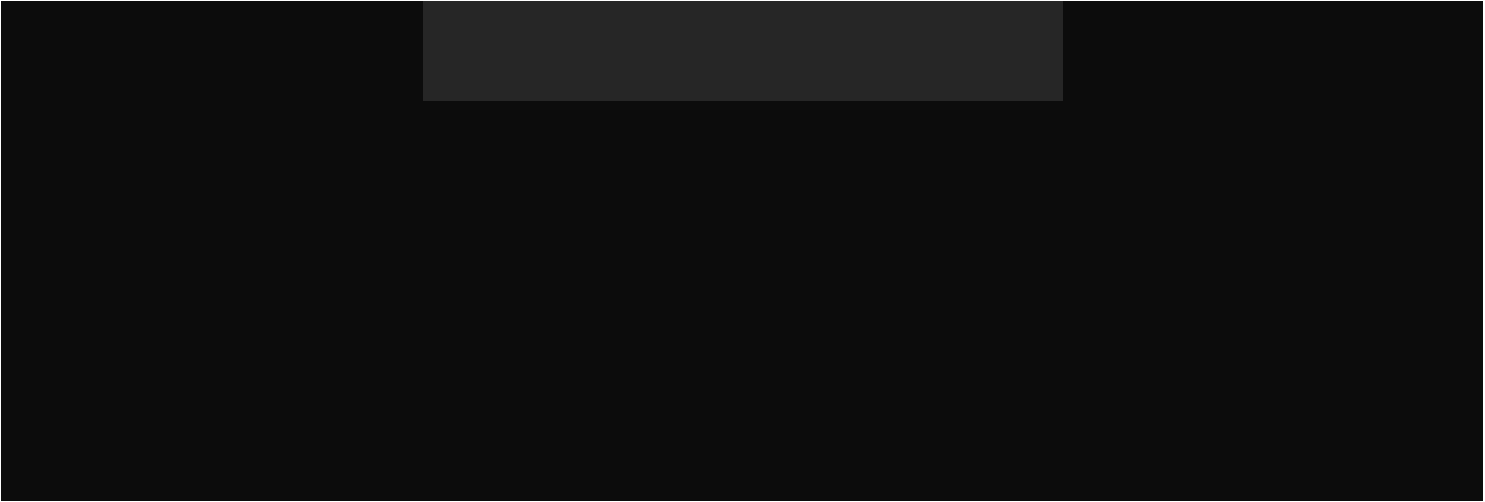


A man working in a coal yard in Vietnam's capital Hanoi on November 9, 2021. [Nhat Nguyen/AFP/Getty Images](#)

Major international financing deal to get Vietnam off coal moves ahead while it locks up climate defenders

By [Helen Regan](#), CNN

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“I’m so worried for Bach’s life,” Thao told CNN. “He is very ill, and he has lost a lot of weight.”

Before his arrest, Bach, a leading Vietnamese environmental lawyer, had spent years working to help communities affected by development projects and environmental degradation.

He was also part of a campaign by climate defenders to push the government to cut its planned expansion of coal power to meet the country’s energy needs.

But their success in lobbying the government has come at a steep personal cost. At least six people – including NGO workers, researchers and technical experts – have been arrested since 2021. All but one was charged with tax evasion.

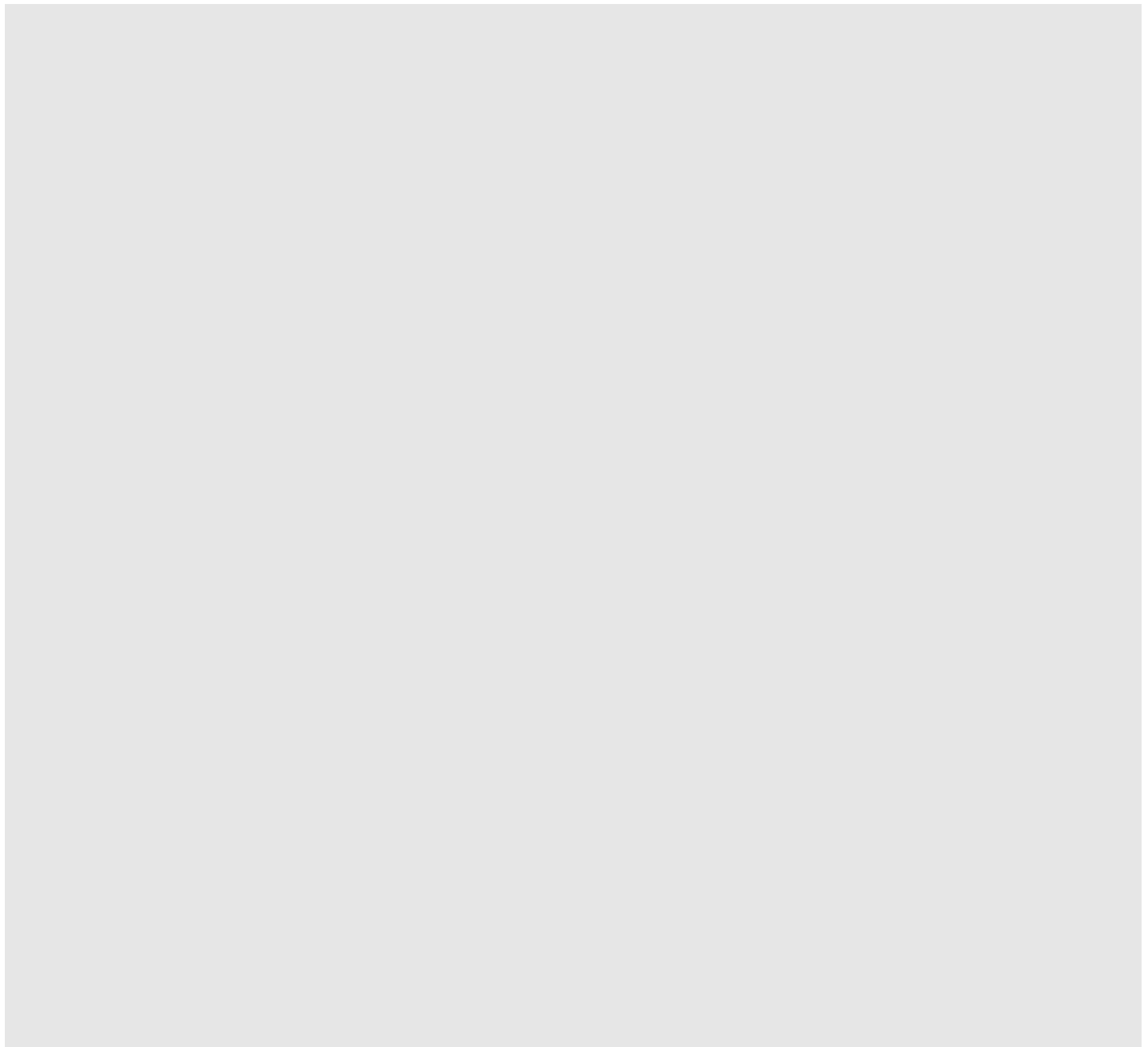
The six were not anti-state activists, some were even working closely with the government on its energy transition at the time of their arrests, according to rights activists.

They were “professionals who are running nonprofits, who didn’t identify with an anti-state ideology, who were playing by the government’s rules, working within the state-sanctioned space for civil society,” Ben Swanton, director of the 88 Project which advocates for human rights in Vietnam, told CNN.

He said they were targeted because they “figured out a way of organizing NGOs into powerful advocacy coalitions which challenge the Communist Party’s monopoly on policymaking.”

The Vietnamese government has denied that it targeted the six for their work.





Danh Dinh Bach, a Vietnamese environmental lawyer and human rights defender who is now in jail.

Courtesy Tran Phuong Thao

Vietnam, a one-party Communist state, has a long history of jailing political activists and tightly restricting civil society. The country ranks 87th out of 142 countries worldwide for rule of law in the World Justice Project 2023 index and is ranked the third worst in the world, behind North Korea and China, for press freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders.

Like many countries in Asia, Vietnam is acutely impacted by the climate crisis, suffering blistering heatwaves, droughts, devastating flooding and toxic pollution.

But the country is also heavily dependent on coal – 45% of the country's energy comes from the fossil fuel.

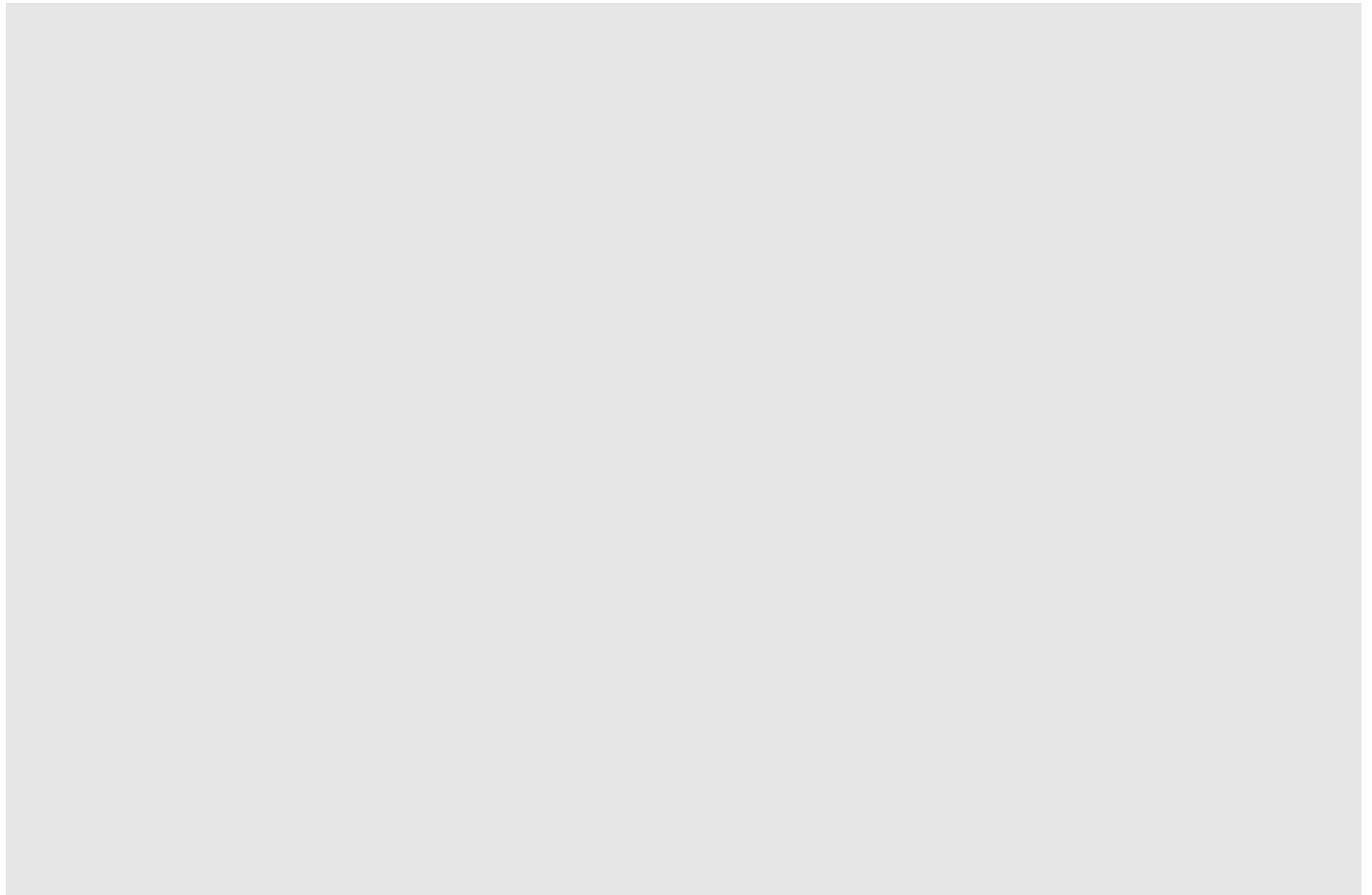
And while Vietnam has made significant pushes into renewable energy in recent years, especially around solar, fossil fuels remain part of its power plan beyond 2030.

The jailed climate defenders

The arrests of the six climate defenders came as Vietnam was negotiating a major \$15.8 billion international financing deal that would help its transition away from fossil fuels to clean energy.

The Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), announced in December 2022, would funnel much-needed funds to help Vietnam deliver on its climate targets, which include reaching net zero by 2050.

At the COP28 climate summit in Dubai on December 1, Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh unveiled the blueprint to put the JETP funding deal in motion. It was hailed by its backers in the International Partners Group, which includes the United Kingdom, European Union, United States and Canadian governments, among others, as an "important first step."



Chinh Pham Minh, Prime Minister of Vietnam, addresses national delegations during the First Part of the High-Level Segment for Heads of States and Governments during the COP28, UN Climate Change Conference, held by UNFCCC in Dubai Exhibition Center, United Arab Emirates on December 2, 2023. Dominika Zarzycka/NurPhoto/Getty Images

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said it would “unlock the vital finance needed to accelerate Vietnam’s transition.” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen praised it as a “great milestone.” And US climate envoy John Kerry said the US would “continue to support Vietnam in this important endeavor.”

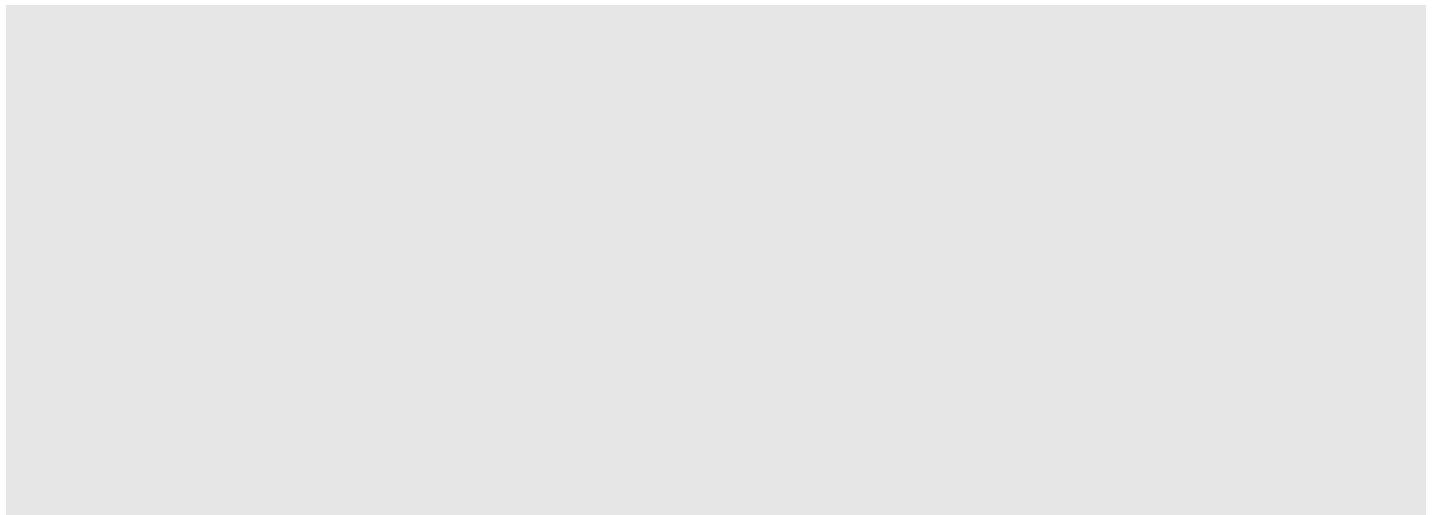
In their statements, none of the leaders mentioned Vietnam’s detention of environmental workers and activists whose work paved the way for the deal to become a reality. That’s despite earlier statements expressing concern for the activists.

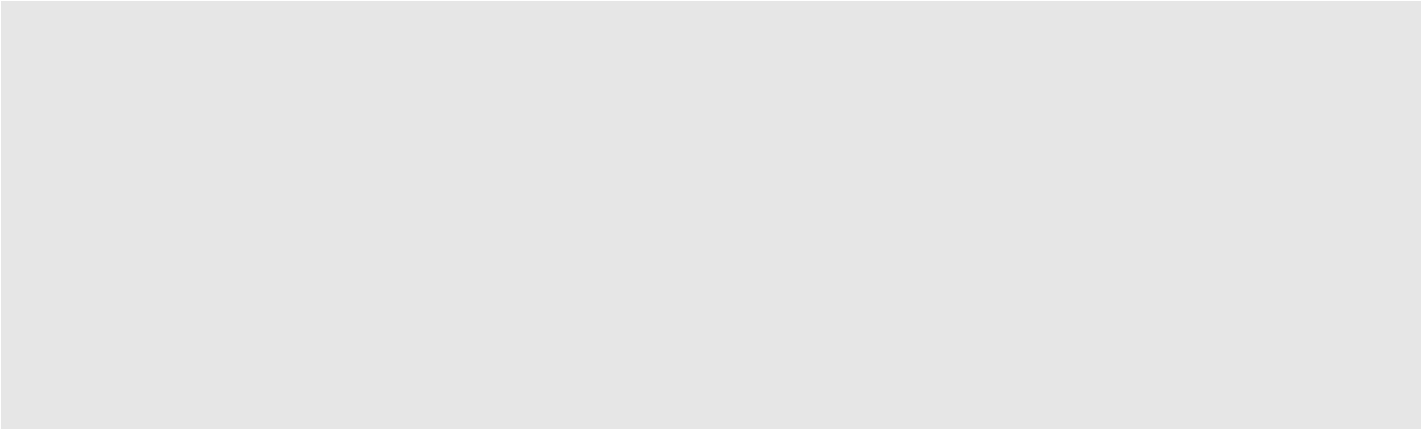
Arrested alongside Bach were journalist Mai Phan Loi and lawyer Bach Hun Duong, who formed the Vietnam Sustainable Energy Alliance to campaign for a change in Vietnam’s energy policy. A fourth leading member Nguy Thi Khanh was arrested in January 2022.

A major part of their work was highlighting the discrepancy between the ambitious climate targets Vietnam had announced on the global stage, and what was happening on the ground: a draft national power development plan that allowed for the continued expansion of coal-fired power.

Khanh is one of Vietnam’s most prominent climate activists. She won the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2018 and her organization the Green Innovation and Development Centre (GreenID) worked closely with the government to revise its energy plan.

Khanh was convicted of tax evasion in June 2022 and sentenced to two years in prison.





Executive director of Green ID Nguy Thi Khanh at the NGO's headquarters in Hanoi. Lillian Suwanrumpha/AFP/Getty Images

Two more climate defenders were arrested this year — Hoang Thi Minh Hong, an Obama Foundation scholar who has led environmental campaigns for at least a decade and Ngo Thi To Nhien, a green energy expert.

Hong, who had worked to address climate change, pollution, and endangered wildlife through her NGO CHANGE, was sentenced to three years in prison in September, also for tax evasion.


Nhien was the executive director of a think tank focused on energy transition and was working with the Vietnamese government and the UN office for project services (UNOPS) at the time of her arrest in September.

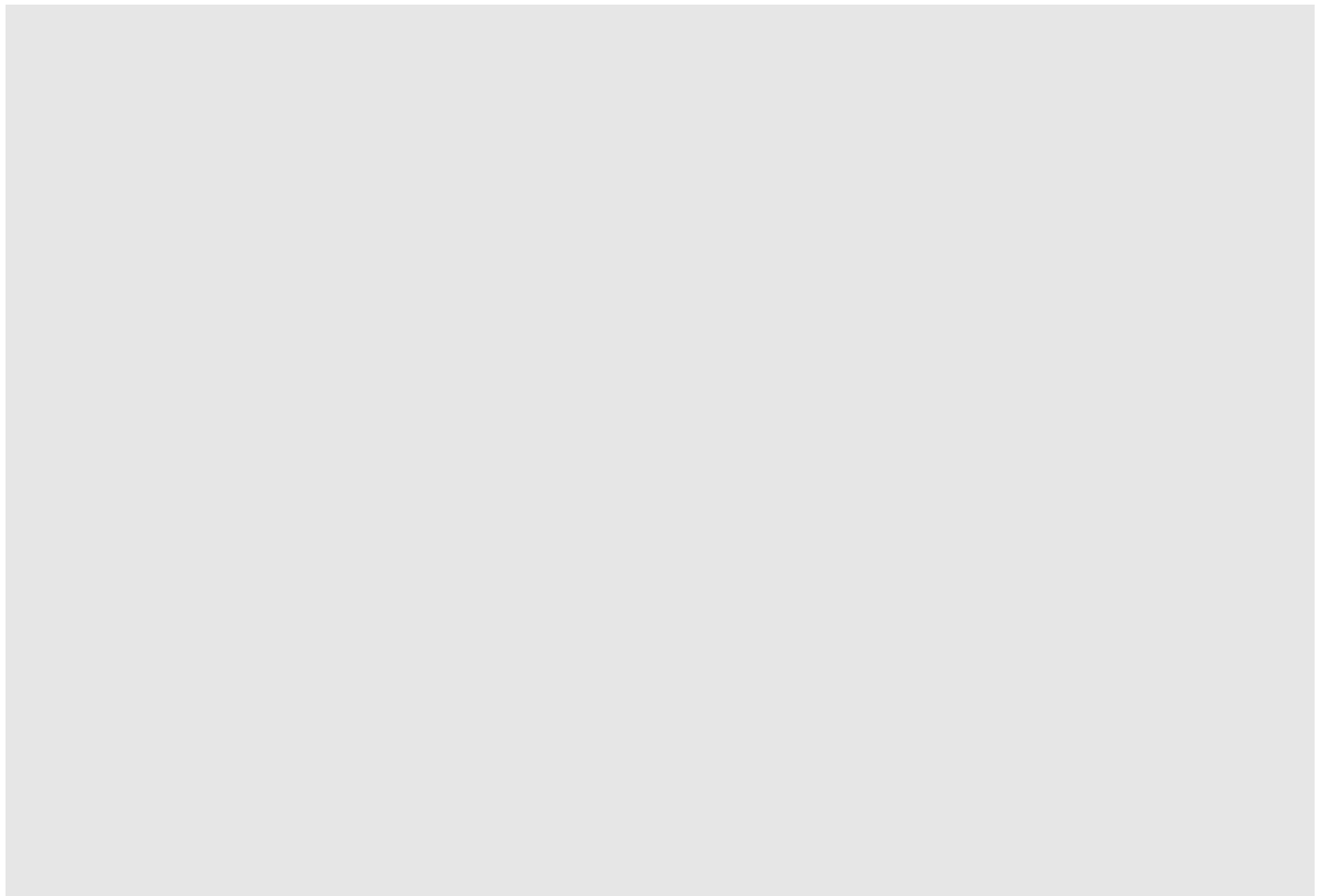
She had recently worked with several international organizations including the UN, World Bank, EU and the Asian Development Bank.

Nhien was charged with “appropriating an organization’s documents,” of the state-owned Electricity of Vietnam, according to the Lieutenant General To An Xo, spokesperson for the Ministry of Public Security, as cited in state media.

Crucially, Nhien and her organization were providing technical and policy advice for the development of the JETP funding deal, according to the Vietnam Climate Defenders Coalition, group of rights organizations and NGOs pushing for the activists’ release.

An investigation earlier this year by the 88 Project determined the climate defenders were persecuted for political reasons, and the Vietnamese government used the tax law to silence them.





This handout photo released by Hoang Vinh Nam shows his wife, Vietnamese environment activist Hoang Thi Minh Hong, in An Giang province on September 5, 2022. Hoang Vinh Nam/Handout/AFP/Getty Images

Even from prison, authorities are attempting to silence Bach, according to Thao, who says his calls are monitored and cut when he talks about his wellbeing or prison conditions.

She said he has been refusing prison meals to protest the conditions, only eating food she brings into the prison, including ramen noodles he eats with cold water. Earlier this year, he was on a hunger strike.

During a recent visit to the prison where Bach is being held, Thao said she saw “bruising and deep wounds” on his body, which she alleges were inflicted by prison officials.

CNN has reached out to the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs for comment on Bach’s arrest and conditions but has not received a response.

Khanh and Loi were released in May and September respectively. Bach Hun Duong was due for release in September, but rights groups cannot verify whether this has happened.

Regarding the arrests of Hong and Nhien, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Pham Thu

regarding the arrests of Hong and Nhien, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Pham Thu Hang said in an October press conference, “We completely reject false information with bad intentions about Vietnam’s crime fighting and prevention activities as well as Vietnam’s external relations,” according to state media.

She said the cases were treated in accordance with the laws of Vietnam, state media reported.

CNN has requested additional comment from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

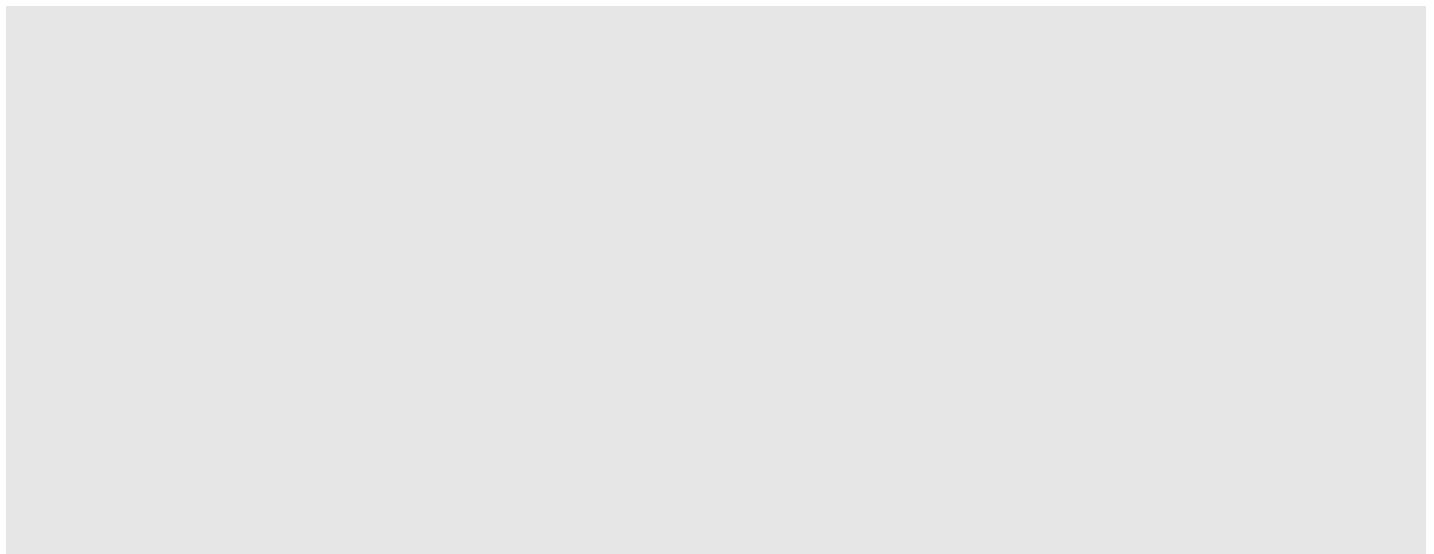
The financing deal

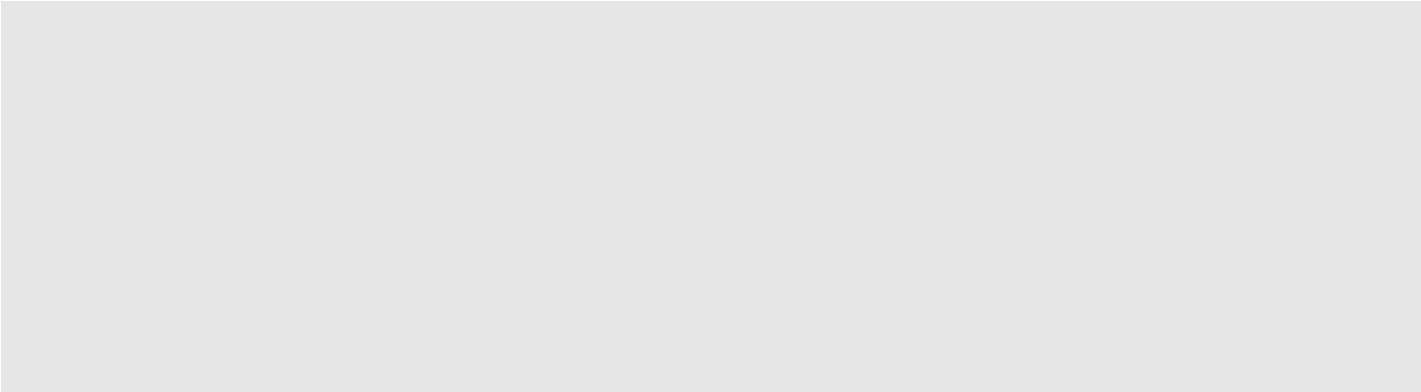
At the heart of the six climate defenders’ work was to influence government policy on fossil fuels and the switch to renewable energy — a move that’s vital to slashing planet-heating pollution and limiting the worst consequences of the human-caused climate crisis.

Vietnam has been ranked among the five countries likely to be most affected by climate change, according to the World Bank, and like many of its Southeast Asian neighbors, Vietnam’s emissions have been rising to accommodate the increasing energy demands of its population.

Richer, industrialized countries with a greater share of responsibility in causing the crisis agreed more than a decade ago to transfer at least \$100 billion a year to help poorer and middle-income nations kick-start their clean energy transitions. But the target has never been met.

The Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) was a way to address this. As well as Vietnam, JETPs have been signed in South Africa and Indonesia.





Municipal workers and residents clean up the streets after waters receded in the old city of Hoi An, a UNESCO world heritage site, on October 30, 2020, in the aftermath of Typhoon Molave. Manan Vatsyayana/AFP/Getty Images

But some experts say Vietnam's blueprint for the JETP may not adequately reduce emissions, as it includes the continued use of coal power stations and technologies that are either unproven or too costly. Those technologies include carbon capture and storage, which hasn't been successfully trialed at scale, and co-firing with ammonia and biomass, which involves replacing some of the coal used for combustion, and is also unproven at commercial scale.

Leo Roberts, fossil fuel transition expert at the think tank E3G says under the JETP, Vietnam plans keep coal plants online, but just use them less.

"Obviously that's a very slippery slope to not really using them that flexibly. It sends a clear signal to the market that the transition to renewables is not happening at pace and scale," he said.

CNN has reached out to Vietnam's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, which is leading implementation of the deal, for comment.

No 'just' transition without civil society

Without people like Khanh, Bach and Nhien and their organizations, there is little oversight to ensure Vietnam will significantly reduce its carbon emissions, according to Guneet Kaur, environmental defender campaign coordinator at International Rivers, part of the Vietnam Climate Defenders Coalition.

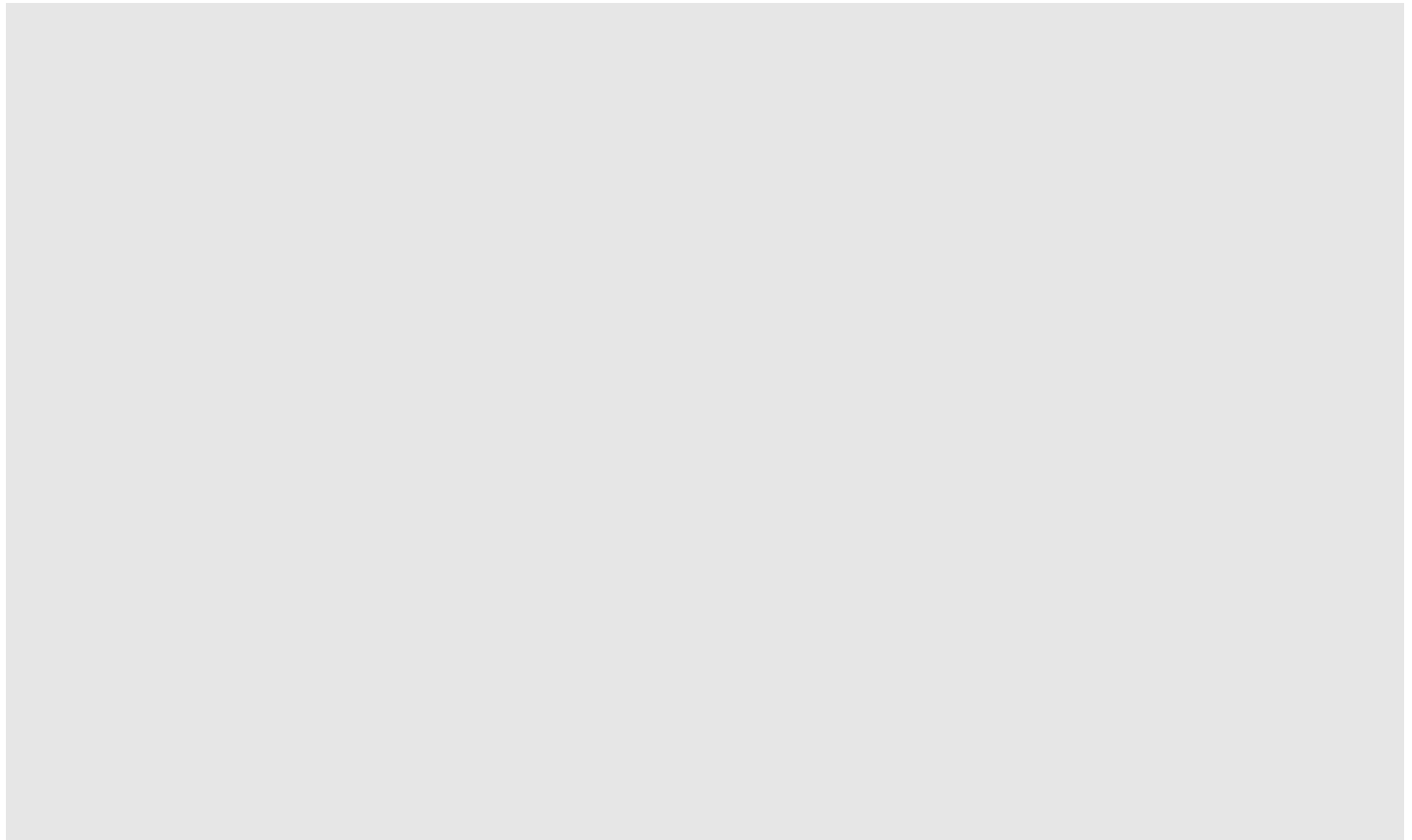
"We really risk greenwashing... the whole climate financing process, the energy transition process, while increasing the marginalizing of more and more communities from Global South, if an actual just transition is not implemented."

Already, the arrests have created a “chilling effect” on “anybody who wants to work and contribute to the success of JETP,” she said.

Climate financing was a major theme at the COP28 summit in Dubai and rights groups say stakeholders need to ensure human rights protections and the inclusion of civil society are built into the framework of the deals.

The Vietnam Climate Defenders Coalition said those stakeholders should have done more to call for the activists’ release and to guarantee no further arrests. They are calling on the International Partners Group, UNOPS, UNDP, and others involved in the creation of the deal and its financing to demand greater protection for climate defenders.

“As key leaders of Vietnam’s climate change movement remain behind bars and JETP donors fail to condition the disbursement of funding on civil society participation, there is nobody left to hold the government to account for breaking its climate promises,” said 88 Project’s Swanton.



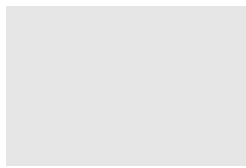
This aerial view taken on September 25, 2022, shows solar panels at Sao Mai solar energy plant in An Giang province. AFP/Getty Images

When reached for comment, a spokesperson for UNOPs said it “expresses its concern about the detentions of environmental advocates in Vietnam.”

UNOPs and the UNDP directed CNN to statements made by the UN human rights office and UN Environment on the activists' detention.

"To achieve the goal of a just and sustainable transition to green energy, human rights defenders and environmental organizations must be able to participate freely and actively in shaping climate and environmental policies and decision-making," the UNHCR statement said in September.

CNN has also reached out for comment to key members of the International Partners Group, including the US climate envoy's office and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but has not received a response.



Pledges from climate talks not enough to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees, IEA says

The European Commission directed CNN to the IPG statement from December 1 announcing the financing deal's rollout, which said "it is vital that civil society is actively involved in a transparent manner at all stages of the JETP to make sure the necessary transition will be just and inclusive."

However, human rights groups point out the JETP was launched with the full endorsement of international partners, despite their publicly stated concerns over the detained activists.

Thao, who is pushing for her husband's release, said she's hopeful he'll be home with his son soon.

"Working to save our environment should not lead to such pain and suffering," she said.

Thao believes "international partners who support Vietnam's energy transition need to set preconditions with the Vietnamese government before grants are made."

Civil society, she said, must be able to "participate in their country's transition to green energy without fear of reprisal."

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