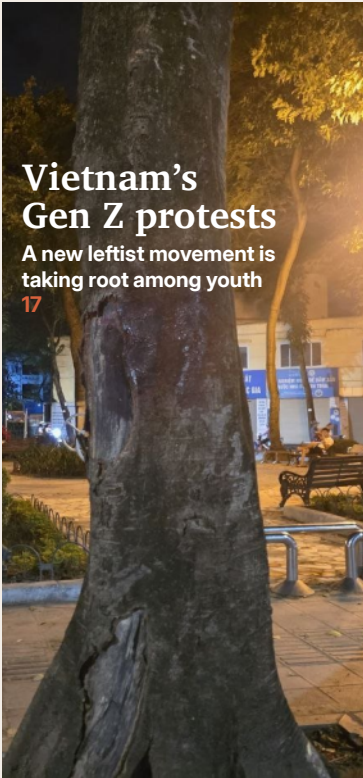


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On ninth anniversary, genocide survivors remember those who didn't make it

Tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees gathered across Cox's Bazar to mark the day Myanmar's military launched a brutal crackdown against them. Nine years later, survivors carry the memories of those who never reached Bangladesh.

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‘We kept waiting for our child’

Militant groups claiming to defend Rohingya rights are increasingly accused of kidnapping for ransom schemes. One family spoke of their 5-year-old disappearing in June.

Children walk through the Rohingya refugee camp on August 11, 2026.



KIDNAPPING REPORTS RISE IN ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS

By Mekong Independent

Mohammed Hares was traveling from Camp 14 in Cox's Bazar to meet a friend when he was grabbed by a group of men near Kutupalong market.

The men dragged him to a nearby building and brutally beat him, bruising his eyes until he couldn't see.

"They covered my mouth with plaster and took me to a place I did not know," the 17-year-old said. He asked the men for some water, which he believes was spiked with a drug.

"After drinking it, I lost consciousness and became paralyzed and could not even move my legs," he added.

Mohammed Hares was a victim of daily abduc-

tions happening in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. UNHCR, the U.N.'s refugee agency, reported that 169 incidents of abduction and kidnapping took place from January to March 2026, a 14% increase from October to December 2025.

But advocates say the numbers are likely higher.

Militants' funds

Many families choose not to report the abductions, fearing retaliation, said Rimas Khan, a Rohingya women's activist.

An armed group abducted her own 10-year-old son in late January and returned him only after the family paid a ransom of 300,000 Bangladeshi taka (around USD \$2,450).

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), and Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) are linked to the kidnappings, among other unidentified groups, Rimas Khan said.

The militant groups, each ranging from 500 to 5,000 members, compete for control and influence in Bangladesh refugee camps. They fund their activities through networks of drug and human trafficking, kidnappings for ransom, and donations from their supporters.

While they originally formed to fight the Myanmar military, most now have shifted their focus to the insurgent Arakan Army, clashing over territory and accusations of collusion with the Myanmar military, as well as tensions over crimes against Rohingya.

While the Rohingya militant groups claim to fight for the rights of the Muslim minority, all have been accused of kidnappings, forced recruitment, and human trafficking.

Mohammed Hares's family waited into the evening for him to return on July 20. Twelve hours after he disappeared, his father, Sayed Alom, received a call on the messaging platform WhatsApp.

"They told me that my son had been kidnapped," Sayed Alom said. "After hearing the news, I lost consciousness."

He also received photos of Mohammed Hares with a knife to his neck, demanding 500,000 taka (over \$4,080). When the father pleaded with the kidnapers, explaining his family was poor and dependent on humanitarian assistance in the camps, they lowered the ransom to 200,000 taka (over \$1,630).

"They threatened me, saying if I could not send the money within one day, I should come and take my son's dead body," Sayed Alom said.



A cropped version of a ransom photo sent to Sayed Alom on WhatsApp. (Supplied)

He has chosen to speak out because he wants the world to know what happened to his son and to ensure other families do not face the same nightmare, he said.

Other families also said they hoped to break the silence and draw attention to the danger faced by Rohingya families.

Daily risks

Community leaders and refugees say the motives of kidnappings vary. For some criminal networks, kidnapping is primarily a way to make money



A view of the camps where refugees live with the daily fear of kidnapping and abduction, photographed on August 21, 2026.

through ransom. Other groups seek to recruit abductees into armed groups.

“From what I have seen, financial gain is one of the main reasons behind these abductions,” said Solim Ullah, a community leader from Camp 14.

Sayed Alom borrowed the money from relatives and community members in the camps, and his son was released six days after the kidnapping.

He’s grateful to have his son back, but his family is now saddled with a different problem.

“I don’t know how I can pay back the debt,” Sayed

Alom said. Refugees are prohibited from working in Bangladesh, leaving many with limited options for earning money.

Kidnappings are also becoming an increasingly common way for armed groups to exert control over vulnerable populations in recent months, camp staff told *Mekong Independent*.

Families reporting cases of kidnapping increased from five in June to eight in July in Camp 14 alone, said Zawkir Ahmed, a Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee protection staff member. There are 33 densely populated camps in Cox's Bazar.

But even these numbers are likely not reflective of the total, he added. Refugees are forced to contend with risks even in simple daily tasks, such as walking to the market or visiting relatives.

Mohammed Zubir, a community leader, said families reported 14 kidnapping cases to him during July in Camp 18, compared to nine in June.

"Families come to me with concerns about missing kidnapping relatives. Some say they received ransom demands," Mohammed Zubir said. "Others don't know where their family members have been taken. This has created a lot of fear in the community."

"You cannot move freely without thinking about

what might happen,” said Shobi Alom, a religious leader in Camp 26. “Families are afraid when their sons or daughters leave home.”

Desperate for jobs and barred from attending accredited schools, young people are particularly vulnerable to groups offering money or opportunities outside the camps.

Some, like 23-year-old Solamot Ullah, were promised transit to Malaysia, where they can find better jobs to support their families.

Solamot Ullah found work carrying aid and equipment into the camp, which was the primary source of income for his family.

“He was the one who worked and fed me,” said his father, 63-year-old Ali Akbor.

Brokers told Solamot Ullah that he could go to Malaysia to get a job. Instead, they took him to Myanmar and asked his father for 100,500 taka (about \$820) for the journey.

Ali Akbor fears his son may have been abducted instead.

“Since then, I have received no information about my son,” he said. “People are telling me that the boat Solamot rode capsized in the Irrawaddy on July 8, 2026. I don’t know whether Solamot is alive or dead.”



Alham, pictured before he was kidnapped. (Supplied)

'We kept waiting'

For some families, the fear is not only that their relatives will be trafficked out of the camps. It is that they may disappear inside them first.

Tabarek Hussein's 5-year-old son, Alham, went outside to play with friends after breakfast on June 14.

When Alham didn't return, his father searched around their home in Camp 9, thinking the young boy might have lost his way home.

The family's fears increased when they received threatening messages, photos and videos from kid-

nappers, demanding 1 million taka (over \$8,145) for their son's return.

"We were terrified, but we hoped that if we paid the money, they would return our son safely," Tabarek Hussein said.

The family managed to pay 400,000 taka (nearly \$3,260) after getting donations from relatives as well as loans, but Alham never returned home. Instead, the kidnappers demanded more money and sent threats, but the family couldn't pay it.

Twelve days after his disappearance, Alham's body was found in some bushes near the Myanmar border in a severely decomposed condition, according to his father.

"We kept waiting for our child," he said. "We hoped every day that he would come back."

Recently, suspects of kidnapping plots have been arrested across multiple camps, said Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Mohammed Mizanur Rahman. He added that they were "monitoring locations where we believe kidnappings may take place," and working with the Bangladesh Armed Police Battalion to improve security.

Despite increased police presence, families are still afraid, said a social worker.



The Bangladesh-Myanmar border area where the decomposed body of Alham was found after his kidnapping, on August 10, 2026.

Some have taken to keeping children indoors as much as possible, afraid to send them outside to play. Mohammed Rofique, who lives in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, has two children, a boy and a girl.

“We only want to live without fear,” he said. “We want our children to be able to go outside and come home safely.”



Vietnam's Gen Z protests mark the emergence of its new left

For the first time since the internet opened civilians to new ideas outside the government's scope, a new independent leftist movement is taking root among Vietnamese youth.

Tree No. 55 on Nguyễn Huy Tự Street in Hà Nội, where an 18-year-old was hit by an official in a fatal crash. When a reporter visited on August 31, 2026, the number on the so-called 'Justice Tree' was spray-painted over.

One day in the middle of August, the sidewalk in front of a public garden in Hà Nội, where locals often take a morning coffee, became the center of attention online. The tree at that location soon started attracting piles of bouquets, and became a symbol of a subtle but growing trend in Vietnam.

Tree No. 55 on the sidewalk of Nguyễn Huy Tự Street in Hà Nội, also known as the Justice Tree, where bouquets brought over by masked passersby kept piling up in commemoration of Đỗ Ngọc Phương Thùy.

This was where, on May 30, 2025, Thùy and her father were hit by a BMW coming in the opposite direction and swerving into their lane. The crash threw them to the ground, severed Thùy's right leg, and seriously damaged her organs. She died 10 days later at the age of 18, days before her high school graduation exam.

More than a year after the actual accident happened, the case took on new gravity on Threads, a platform where Gen Z Vietnamese have found new space to express their frustrations with the inequities they see everyday — and consider what they may do to reshape their futures.

“Like many, I was distraught when I first heard of

the accident. Her life was cut so short when there was so much ahead of her,” said Linh, a 24-year-old Vietnamese woman working in the UK after finishing studies there, who spoke using a pseudonym out of fear of repercussions in Vietnam.

The local press initially identified the driver by the initials N.S.C., a 64-year-old man living in Hanoi, but rumors started circulating that the driver was actually Nguyễn Sỹ Cường, a former Vietnam National Assembly deputy and husband of a high-ranking party official.

People hoping for prosecution of the deputy were soon disappointed. After the case was said to have been transferred to the police for further investigation, no further updates followed. “Was the case disappeared already, pals?” asked a user in an online forum where people watched the case back in June 2025. Months later, it seemed like it was.

However, 15 months later, after a wave of Gen Z outcry identifying the tree as a symbol on Threads, National Television ran a documentary that confirmed that Nguyễn Sỹ Cường was the driver, but showed the investigation’s conclusion that he was not prosecuted at the family’s request. The father of the victim was featured, filmed with his back to the cam-

era, urging the public to stop pursuing the incident. Toward the end, the audience was warned to stay calm and not be instigated by “terrorist organizations.” Nguyễn Sỹ Cường was not presented in the segment.

The television report — which was later reposted with the document that dismissed the prosecution blurred — sowed further suspicion and frustration. Many responded with disgust, seeing this as another attempt to smear critics with legitimate concerns in blatant defense of the former National Assembly deputy.

“How cruel are you to bring a father who lost his only daughter to explain on the offender’s behalf?” said one anonymous comment.

“Terrorists in the past bore guns, terrorists today bear flowers,” noted another.

By the time of this reporting, the wave of online dissidence subsided, and as of September 1, the tree’s number appeared covered with spray paint. However the symbols stay alive on the internet: photos of white ribbons attached to backpacks in Thùy’s memory, the photo of the flowers thrown in a dumpster and sketches and artwork of the Justice Tree.

“People may not see it this way, but it was, for me,

like a silent protest. And the police's response was out of proportion," Linh noted.

On the other side, men with the look of plain-clothes authorities can still be seen stationed around the Justice Tree.

In a country where civil society has remained repressed and the youth are often derided by many, including state media, as "apathetic" and "selfish," the event offered a glimpse into a new wave of political commentary and activity among young Vietnamese whose beliefs and orientations are still not adequately appreciated.

Simmering discontent

Thùy's death and the lack of investigation around it echoed another incident of unjust traffic fatalities that resurfaced a month before the crash in Hà Nội.

In September 2024, 14-year-old girl identified with her initials, N.N.B.Tr., was riding an electric bicycle on Provincial Road 901 in Trà Ôn, Vĩnh Long, when she collided with another electric bicycle rider. She fell into the path of an oncoming truck and was run over and killed. Authorities initially declined to prosecute, alleging that it was the deceased teenage girl who "committed the socially dangerous act."

Her father, identified as Mr. Phúc, repeatedly challenged that decision to no avail. One year later, on August 28, 2025, he shot the truck driver involved before committing suicide. Mr. Phúc died while the driver was seriously injured. Later, it was confirmed that the truck driver's family had connections with one Deputy Head of the Investigation Agency of Trà Vinh's police.

The two cases exemplify what many have long felt to be the cruel reality in Vietnam, where “people do not have any faith in the law anymore, because the people they believe will protect them don't protect them,” said Linh, the Vietnamese student participating in online discourse while in the UK. The flowers laid around the Justice Tree became for many the last resort at calling for accountability and pleading the authorities to salvage that faith.

Nam, a pseudonymous 27-year-old who went to Canada to study business and who came to use Threads actively to raise awareness on political issues, also got to take part in this public ritual. He asked a friend in Hà Nội to place a bouquet at the Tree of Justice in commemoration of Thùy.

“It was very heartwarming to see people stand together and raise their voices against injustice. Turns

out, humanity is still alive,” said Nam.

For young people, this perceived unfairness is compounded by economic inequality and the environmental degradation that they feel around them — something which deviates wildly from the promises of a socialist country they were taught about in school and society, where the environment is well taken care of and workers are treated with dignity.

Just a few weeks before netizens turned their focus toward Thùy’s death and impunity of Nguyễn Sỹ Cường, Threads users were discussing the Hải Vân Pass, a famous 21-kilometer mountain pass in central Vietnam, where a large swath of natural grove was felled to make way for Vinhomes Làng Vân, a resort project by the politically-connected conglomerate Vingroup.

While netizens criticized the project, they witnessed no critical coverage of it in state media, except for a few articles covering the importance of relic sites within the area reserved for the resort.

In a video that went viral on Instagram by a Vietnamese artist, she said: “They vacuumed up public coastlines and ecosystems, converting them into lifeless ghost towns. And we Vietnamese have no structural way to push back.”

"It was very heartwarming to see people stand together and raise their voices against injustice. Turns out, humanity is still alive."

Nam, 27

Linh, the Threads user, described the shock she felt coming back to Vietnam earlier this year after studying in the UK for two years, noting that civilians are noticing the decline in nature and even urban living.

"It was like a slap in the face," she said. "The environment was so polluted that for the first two days I couldn't breathe."

For over 10 years, Vietnam has experienced serious air-pollution problems, especially from fine particulate matter (PM2.5), often known colloquially as "fine dust," a kind of particle that can enter deep into human lungs and bloodstreams. Long-term exposure to this is often associated with increased risks of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, and respiratory

problems. Currently, Vietnam's estimated annual PM2.5 exposure of $26 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ is roughly five times the World Health Organization guideline of $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. In big cities like Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, fine dust and smog are inescapable aspects of urban life and development.

While some contend that environmental degradation is a price to pay on the country's path to prosperity, others see that the benefits have not been equally distributed — something that exemplifies the capitalistic nature of its economy.

“There is no way the Vietnamese Communist Party can be called Marxist. Rhetorically, perhaps. But the way Vietnam is organized economically is purely capitalist,” said Susann Pham, a researcher on social movements in Vietnam and the author of *Vietnam's Dissidents*.

In Vietnam, where a worker makes on average 9 million VND per month (roughly \$340 a month), the housing price is roughly 128 million VND per sqm in Hà Nội. So to own a 30 m^2 new apartment at the average Hà Nội price, a person of average income will have to spend roughly 100% of their income over 35 years. This is the case even for those with a university degree.

Gia, a 26-year-old graduate from a top university, confessed that she only makes VND 10 million a month (\$400) teaching English in a northern province.

“When I was teaching in Hà Nội, my salary was about VND 20 million [\$767 per month], but the costs of living are so high that it was not nearly enough,” she said. Gia said that she didn’t intend to buy a house, but for her friends who need to buy one, the current situation makes them extremely stressed.

For Gen Z individuals like Gia, they are concerned that inequality and affordability are not just sources of personal grievances, but also prevent Vietnam from improving the future of its people.

The intergenerational gap

These issues didn’t arise among Gen Z only, but they sprung up anytime a new forum became available for people to mull on their concerns. Since 2006, when Vietnam officially joined the World Trade Organization, new dissident movements emerged throughout the country, pushing for democracy, land and labor rights activism and environmental protection and preservation.

This plethora of dissent was enabled partly by the

proliferation of social platforms available to anyone with an Internet connection — Yahoo 360, WordPress, YouTube and most notably Facebook — which provided the information to challenge the Vietnamese Communist Party’s propaganda and the infrastructure for mobilization. This grassroots democracy resulted in waves of protests throughout the years, culminating in the massive protest in 2018 against a draft proposal for the establishment of a special economic zone that would allow land leases of 99 years to foreign entities, feared to undermine the country’s sovereignty, and the passing of a cybersecurity law that many saw as encroaching on freedom of speech.

Meta, the parent company behind Facebook, Instagram and Threads, has become known to censor posts and take down accounts at the government’s request. At the same time, the Vietnam Communist Party has deployed its 10,000-strong military cyber troops, also known as Force 47, to fight off “wrongful information and anti-state propaganda.” Coupled with that is the wave of repression and arrests that intensified after Tô Lâm, the country’s former minister of public security, became general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam and president in 2024.

That repression has proved too effective at silenc-

ing questions and concerns that could raise up online, to the point that “the former democracy movement doesn’t exist anymore,” according to Susann Pham, the researcher.

“The people from the older generation are either in prison or in exile,” said Susann Pham. “Once these dissidents leave Vietnam, it is hard for them to transfer their strategies and knowledge to the next generation.”

The Gen Z generation that is now active online says they had no exposure to this history of dissent, as it had been wiped away and hidden before they could understand. Instead, they were exposed to international movements, particularly the genocide against Palestinians and their fight for self-sovereignty.

Daughter to an upper-middle-class family, Linh said she had the privilege of going to study at a university in the U.K. in 2021, and while there, got her first taste of activism, seeing for the first time huge strikes by workers from many fields.

“It was inspiring to see how they care about their welfare and human rights and are willing to fight for it,” Linh recalled. But Linh said her interest pivoted toward activism after she, and other young Viet-

"The people from the older generation are either in prison or in exile. Once these dissidents leave Vietnam, it is hard for them to transfer their strategies and knowledge to the next generation."

Susann Pham, author of *Vietnam's Dissidents*

name online, started learning about Israel's genocide in Gaza.

"I read many articles on the genocide and they made me more involved in politics. The Palestinian question made me more focused and helped me connect the issues together. There was, like, an intersectionality of different oppressions."

Linh started learning more about the history of labor movements worldwide, which eventually brought her back towards Marxism and Vietnamese revolutionaries like Tạ Thu Thâu, a Marxist censured in Vietnam's official history as a "Trotskyist". The term, alluding to a key Russian communist revolution, is

used in Vietnam as a common slur against leftists who disagree with the official line of the VCP and its predecessors.

“This philosophy aligns with the values I’ve long strived for: fairness and equality for everyone. I want everyone to be happy,” said Linh.

This trajectory is also shared by Gia, the English teacher now living in Vietnam. She first used Threads in 2024, initially to advertise her English classes, without knowing much about politics.

Her first taste of politics was when she got scolded by some leftist users after she posted a photo of Jordan Peterson, a right-wing influencer from Canada, with a caption praising his “daddy’s vibe.” Other social media users informed her that she was sharing photos of a person who discriminated against the LGBTQ+ community, which left an impression on Gia.

“I didn’t know who the guy was, but after I learned more about him, I found that they were actually right,” Gia confessed.

Gia then intentionally sought out, and was fed through the algorithms, content related to Palestine and leftist politics.

“It was like a crash course in leftist politics, and I

learned very fast,” said Gia. “Safe to say that Threads is the nesting ground for leftists.”

Now identifying as a Marxist, Gia says she spends more time reading classic texts by Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin and other revolutionaries.

“It might not be clear by now, but I want to live a life committed to the class struggle,” said Gia.

For a small but increasingly visible group of young Vietnamese activists, this marks a major departure from the past movements.

“Back then, it was impossible to call certain ideas ‘left’ in the Vietnamese context,” said Susann Pham. “What left means, at its core, is being anti-capitalist and being a little bit Marxist.”

She noted that this generation’s embrace of Marxist philosophy is a contrast from previous online movements, which took a strong anti-communist approach in its critiques of Vietnam’s social, labor and environmental conditions.

“Because the older generation was very radical in its anti-communism, it might not really respond to how the young generation strategizes its activism,” Susann Pham concluded.

With this understanding, Linh, Nam and Gia arrived at a conclusion different from that of the past

dissidents. The problem with Vietnam is not that it is communist, but because it is only communist “in name.” The new left, though lacking in resources, organization, and civic liberty, is committed to bringing about a brighter future, which they say could be both communist and democratic in reality.

“Regardless of what kind of state it is, people should at least have the right to protest so they can properly express their political will. The VCP has failed to provide even that, meaning it doesn’t give people even the basic democratic rights found in a bourgeois state, let alone a communist one,” Gia said.

For Nam, he got a glimpse of the future he wants to build in the circle of flowers people laid under the Justice Tree.

“It shows us that what we want is not that far away. We might begin with something simple: you see the pain of others in your pain, and then have a political direction to solve both your problems and others’ problems,” said Nam.

“Isn’t that unity what is captured in the last line of *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘Workers of the world, unite?’”





Chồng Tôi
Vô Tội

Đỗ Thị Thu advocates for her husband's release on Facebook despite pressure to stop speaking out. (Supplied)

DESPITE OBSTACLES, FACEBOOK IS ONE OF THE ONLY CHOICES TO PURSUE JUSTICE IN VIETNAM

By Hương Thiện

Less than a year since its launch in 2025, the Facebook page Đường Về Nhà (The Road Home), has brought the voices of communities seeking justice closer to the public.

More than 50 real-life stories — each a journey marked by loss and years, even decades, of waiting in search of justice — would have remained unheard if not brought to light.

The group's posts on state repression and other injustices have now reached more than 104,000 followers, putting it on the Vietnamese government's radar.

One of the most watched video clips was that of

Nguyễn Thị Loan, with more than 4 million views. She is perhaps the most well-known mother in Vietnam, fighting since 2008 for the release of her son Hồ Duy Hải, who was charged with murder and allegedly tortured for a confession. The case has drawn calls for his acquittal from parliament members, diplomatic missions and international rights groups, including Amnesty International.

The police have labeled the Facebook page as “subversive” and “anti-state,” a common accusation against dissidents in Vietnam. Phạm Thanh Nghiên, spokesperson of the page, says those featured in the videos have been summoned to police stations and questioned about who had interviewed them and who has been managing the page.

In Vietnam, ranked 174th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ Press Freedom Index and one of the worst jailers of journalists, Facebook emerged as a vital venue for political participation, public debate and social activism. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, 70% of Vietnamese people turned to social media channels, particularly Facebook, for political news.

Increasingly, the platform has complied with government demands, leaving dwindling space for free-

dom of expression. Yet activists still have little choice but to resort to Facebook for their work on democracy and social justice.

Documenting and counting

Phạm Thanh Nghiên says her page was deactivated twice for vaguely defined violations of community standards. Each time, her voluntary team had to file a monthlong appeal with Meta to reclaim it.

“We have prepared for this [deactivation],” says Phạm Thanh Nghiên, who fought to reclaim her own page deactivated by Meta in the past. “We have a website to back up deleted content.”

“In some cases, the pressure has gone even further — informants have been threatened and explicitly warned to cut ties with the group altogether,” says Nghiên, a former prisoner of conscience who has been in exile in the U.S. since 2023.

A 2025 report published by Legal Initiatives for Vietnam, a nonprofit working to promote democracy in the country, says Facebook was “complicit in restricting fundamental freedoms” in the Southeast Asian nation, its third largest market in the region and seventh biggest worldwide.

The compliance rate for content takedowns and

"It is the only place where I can express my opinion."

Phạm Thanh Nghiên, spokesperson for *The Road Home*

account restrictions, especially those of well-known dissidents, have been overwhelmingly more than 90%. Meta has so far been silent on the chilling number of human rights defenders imprisoned for their Facebook posts. At least 16 independent journalists who are currently behind bars used Facebook as their main platform.

The pressure comes as the Ministry of Public Security has been tightening its grip, with no sign of easing. From the adoption of cybersecurity laws to employing surveillance technology, Vietnam is now following in China's footsteps. The ministry, the biggest owner of personal data in Vietnam, is now proposing to build a China-style firewall in the country. Vietnamese police now not only fines those who post content that is deemed as regime-unfriendly but also share posts of dissidents.

According to a 2026 Human Rights Watch report, Vietnam held more than 160 political prisoners and detained at least 40 others for criticizing the govern-

ment. The crackdown has intensified through expanded use of Criminal Code Article 331, or “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the state.” Authorities deploy the law to silence social media users raising concerns about religious freedom, land rights, Indigenous rights, and government corruption.

Phạm Thanh Nghiên says she has no other choice than to keep up the fight on Facebook.

“It is the only place where I can express my opinion,” she says. Her personal blog, where she shares human rights issues, has been blocked in Vietnam since 2013. When she first set out on activism back in 2007, Facebook wasn’t in Vietnam yet, so it felt isolating. Yet Facebook connected her with fellow activists across the country.

“I have Threads but rarely use it due to language barriers and time constraints — my main job involves writing long articles and reports. Instagram is another option, but if Facebook becomes too restrictive in the future, I’ll need to switch to other platforms.”

Livestreaming against all odds

Long before his imprisonment, Trịnh Bá Phương’s family were frequent Facebook livestreamers. After

his family became victims of forced land confiscation in 2008 in Dương Nội, in suburban Hanoi, he — along with his parents and siblings — became prominent activists in Vietnam's land-rights movement. Land disputes, especially land acquisition for so-called development purposes that benefit state-owned and state-friendly conglomerates, along with systematic undercompensation, have long been a major source of social grievances in Vietnam.

Trịnh Bá Phương regularly livestreamed real-time coercive land seizures, protests of farmers against local authorities, and the numerous incidents of harassment his family faced. His parents were each imprisoned for 30 months for “disturbing public order” in 2015, but this did not deter the family's activism.

On January 9, 2020, the situation came to a head: A lethal clash between protesters and police in Đồng Tâm village left three officers dead. The night before, Trịnh Bá Phương had posted a stream of images on Facebook, keeping the public in the loop.

Around 5 a.m., he went live with a six-minute video as both uniform and plainclothes police besieged his house. The video ended abruptly as his entrance was destroyed. He was arrested on that day

without a warrant. In 2021, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison under Article 117 of the Penal Code on charges of “making, storing, spreading information, materials, and items for the purpose of opposing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.”

His mother and his brother were imprisoned on the same charge.

In September 2025, in a trial lasting less than three hours, Trịnh Bá Phương was handed an additional 11-year prison sentence for the same charge, on the grounds that he had allegedly written a note reading “down with communism” while in prison. All together, the family faces a combined total of 37 years behind bars.

Now his wife, Đỗ Thị Thu, is active on Facebook. She has posted that her family, as well as representatives of diplomatic missions in Vietnam, were denied entry to the courtroom and forced instead to wait outside in the rain on the day of the trial.

Last December, she said on her Facebook page that the police had banned her from traveling abroad for “national security reasons,” but her request for a written document on that decision was turned down. The police have repeatedly warned her not to post on Facebook.

“For me, these threats are now normal,” says Đỗ Thị Thu, who also uses the platform to promote her homegrown food for sale and connect with other Vietnamese activists.

Her homegrown pomelos have become a small rallying point. Through Facebook, she befriends other activists and those who admire the family, who help connect her with customers as far away as Europe. Nguyễn Thuý Hạnh, a former prisoner of conscience on charge of anti-state propaganda, who was released in October 2024, wrote on Facebook:

“As long as this Facebook account of Nguyễn Thuý Hạnh exists, I will also stand against opportunists, those who act as pawns for security forces to insult true fighters, the envious, and the internet bullies. And I will continue to call for people to buy grapefruit from Thêu [Thu’s family], as well as quietly support political prisoners!”

Creatively combating censorship

Not all activists have stayed with Facebook. Cù Huy Hà Vũ, an exiled jurist in the United States, and Nguyễn Quang A, a prominent human rights defender who has been banned from travelling overseas since 2023, have stopped using the platforms after their



Đỗ Thị Thu sells peanut oil and other homegrown food on Facebook alongside her advocacy. (Supplied)

pages were repeatedly attacked, and then deactivated by Meta.

Before her exile in 2018, Đỗ Nguyễn Mai Khôi — formerly known as the Lady Gaga of Vietnam who rose to stardom in Vietnam in the 2010s — actively used Facebook not only to disseminate her music but also to circulate political messages. These included informing her fans about her independent candidacy for the National Assembly in 2016 and meeting with

former U.S. President Barack Obama in the same year in Hanoi, as well as documenting her harassment by local police, including a forced eviction from her own home.

Between 2020 and 2022, she urged Facebook to take measures to protect Vietnamese users from state-backed cybertroopers consisting of police, army personnel, and loyalists. But even as she continues to fight for human rights back home, she no longer believes in the platform.

“They have stopped responding to me since 2023 so I have not followed up with them,” Đỗ Nguyễn Mai Khôi says. “I am frustrated. But I’m still using the platform because that’s the only place when my mom and I follow each other every day. My mom is [70 years] old so she can’t use another platform.”

“I also don’t want to use Facebook in the same way as before,” she adds. “It’s just there to keep your old friends, but not for spreading political messages anymore.”

She continues to post on her YouTube channel, with many of her songs tinged with political rhetoric. Nguyễn Quang A, the prominent human rights defender who is now 80 years old, has also turned to YouTube to share regular explainer videos he films

himself on socioeconomic issues. With 99 episodes uploaded, his channel Ý Vụn (Scattered thoughts) has now reached 13,000 followers.

The Road Home's team is not giving up, however. Last November, in light of legal risks facing the victims they featured, the team made a temporary pause to look for new approaches.

For now, the team has stopped posting interview videos that use participants' real images and real voices.

According to Vũ Huy Hoàng — an activist in hiding since 2024 and the administrator of the page, the group is experimenting with recording the memories of those who have served sentences, including both criminal and political prisoners.

They are building an online platform where prisoners' stories are presented as a “memory map,” map including space-visualization drawings of the detention facilities.

They are also experimenting with AI to provide legal support or mask the identities of those giving testimony.

The page has been renamed Tai Vách Mạch Dừng (Walls Have Ears) — with the hope that stories of injustices can continue to be told and heard. ■



Nine years later, survivors recall those who didn't make it

Rohingya refugees express their demand to have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their future, including their rights, protection and return to their homeland, during Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on August 25, 2026. (Niyamot Ullah/Mekong Independent)



Tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees gathered across Cox's Bazar to mark the day Myanmar's military launched a brutal crackdown against them. On the ninth anniversary, the genocide survivors carried the memories of those who never reached Bangladesh.

By Niyamot Ullah

For Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, August 25 is not simply a date marking the beginning of their mass displacement. It is the day they remember the family members who never made it to Bangladesh. Nine years ago, Myanmar's military launched a brutal crackdown in northern Rakhine State, forcing more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.

This year, tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees gathered across camps in Cox's Bazar to mark the ninth anniversary, demanding justice and a safe, voluntary and dignified return to their homeland. At the largest gathering, more than 100,000 Rohingya were reported to have assembled at the Camp 4 Extension football field. Their central message was simple: They want to return home, but not without safety, rights

and dignity. But behind the speeches and banners were memories that remain painfully personal.

'Allah saved me'

Hamida Begum, 44, remembers the evening of August 25, 2017, as a desperate attempt to keep her family alive. When Myanmar soldiers entered her village of Donkhali in northern Rakhine State, her house was set on fire. She and her family fled with her disabled husband, Soyed Alom, who could not walk. Hamida Begum and her eldest son placed him in a large basket and carried him on their shoulders as they tried to escape.

She believed that if they could reach the nearby beach, they might survive. Then the gunfire began.

"Bullets were passing right beside my body. Allah saved me," Hamida Begum recalled.

She said soldiers were firing from the east toward the fleeing villagers. While still carrying her husband, she and her son crouched down, trying to protect themselves from the bullets.

"I saw many people being hit by bullets and falling to the ground, one after another, like trees falling," she said.

As they continued fleeing, she realized that sol-

diers were coming after them. Fearing that the soldiers would catch the whole family, they made a decision that still haunts her. They left Soyed Alom behind and ran toward a nearby dam, where she and her children hid. From behind the dam, she said, she watched her husband.

“I saw my husband being cut with a long knife into two pieces,” she said.

Overwhelmed by what she had witnessed, she began to scream. Her eldest son quickly covered her mouth, fearing the soldiers would hear them.

“I wanted to cry out, but my son stopped me because if they noticed us, they might kill us too,” she said.

From their hiding place, she could see bodies scattered along roads and paddy fields, including men, women and children.

“After killing him, they took my husband away in a truck,” she recalled of the last sight of her husband.

Nine years later, she still carries the memory of the husband she wanted desperately to save.

‘They took two of my sons from my side’

For Sayed Azim, 52, August 25 is the day he lost two sons. When soldiers surrounded Maung Nu vil-



Sayed Azim, 52, who lost his two sons during the 2017 attacks, carries his memory and grief as August 25 returns each year. (Niyamot Ullah/Mekong Independent)

lage, Sayed Azim, his family and other villagers sought shelter inside a muddy house. They closed the door, hoping they would remain safe. The soldiers forced their way inside, he said. “They opened the door and entered. Then one soldier fired into the group,” Sayed Azim recalled. He said a young child, maybe 9, was killed.

The soldiers then searched the house and took Azim’s 16-year-old son, Hamim, a ninth-grade stu-

dent. “They took my son Hamim outside and killed him.”

Then his younger son, Noyum, 14, a sixth-grade student, was taken from the arms of his mother, Zubaida, 44. “They took two of my sons from my side,” Sayed Azim said.

He said he watched helplessly as Noyum was taken away from his mother’s embrace and killed. Azim said he witnessed widespread killings around him. He estimated that more than 500 people were killed in the violence he witnessed.

He also said his and villagers’ belongings were looted, some people were buried alive and others were taken away in trucks. His wife, Zubaida, he said, has struggled to recover from the loss. He said she has lost her eyesight and continues to mourn their sons.

“My wife still cries for them,” he said. He remains haunted by what happened. “I always think about my sons and remember how they were killed,” he said. “I have lost my peace. I want justice for my sons.”

‘They killed my father first’

Samira, 22, from Buthidaung, remembers the day in 2017 through the killing of her father and the sex-

ual violence she suffered at the hands of Myanmar soldiers. She said soldiers first shot and killed her father before turning on her.

“They killed my father first,” Samira recalled. She said four soldiers held her down while three raped her brutally. One tore her sarong skirt, grabbed her by the mouth and held her tightly so she could not cry out. Another soldier pressed a knife into her side and kept it there during the assault, she said.

“One military stuck a knife into my side and kept it there while the three were raping me,” Samira recalled. “That was how they kept me in place.” She said she tried to move, causing the wound to bleed more heavily. “I was trying to move and the wound was bleeding more,” she said. “They were threatening to shoot me.”

“Every August 25, I remember my father who was killed and the violence I survived. Nine years have passed, but the pain remains. I want the world to remember the Rohingya victims and stand with us for justice and a safe return home.” Samira said.

Her testimony reflects the sexual violence reported by Rohingya survivors of the 2017 crackdown.

The U.N. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar found widespread sexual as-

sault, including gang rape, and said sexual violence was part of the broader campaign against the Rohingya in a 2019 report.

Call for global solidarity

The consequences of 2017 have extended beyond those who witnessed the violence. Children born in Bangladesh have grown up knowing Myanmar mainly through their parents' memories.

At this year's rally, participant Md Yeasin, 35, said he joined the gathering to remember the past and call for a safe return home for future generations. "My children were born here. They know Myanmar from what I tell them. I cannot show them our house or take them to our village," he said.

A young participant, Shobi Ullah, said he joined the campaign to remember what was lost and renew their call to return home.

"We left our house, our land and our belongings. We thought we would come back after a few days," he said.

The memories of survivors were echoed by Rohingya leaders.

Sayed Ullah, president of the panel of the United Council of Rohingya, called on people around the

"Every August 25, I remember my father who was killed and the violence I survived. Nine years have passed, but the pain remains. I want the world to remember the Rohingya victims and stand with us for justice and a safe return home."

Samira, 22

world to pause and stand with the Rohingya for 10 minutes as part of the August 25 campaign. The campaign theme, "Nine years gone, think 10 minutes for Rohingya," was intended to turn remembrance into a moment of global solidarity.

A U.N. special rapporteur issued a statement marking nine years since the violence that drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from Myanmar.

The statement, titled "Rohingya Remembrance Day: Remembering the Victims, Confronting Impunity, Upholding the Rights and Dignity of the Rohingya," explicitly referred to the "genocidal campaign" launched in northern Rakhine State in 2017.



Rohingya refugees walk in a long line toward the campaign field in Camp 4. (Niyamot Ullah/Mekong Independent)



Rohingya refugees call for a safe, voluntary and dignified return to their homeland. (Niyamot Ullah/Mekong Independent)

The rapporteur called for the victims and survivors to be remembered and for accountability and the rights and dignity of the Rohingya to be upheld.

In the camps, the Rohingya are still waiting for the chance to return home.

“We survived the violence, but we do not want our children to lose their future. We gathered here today to ask the world to help us return home safely, with security and citizenship rights,” Md Yeasin said.

A middle-aged man with dark hair and a light beard stands in front of a wooden structure. He is wearing a light blue and white checkered button-down shirt, which is open at the collar. The background shows a wooden frame, a yellow tarp, and a motorcycle parked on a dirt path.

Anxieties Cambodia

A Phnom Penh court has ordered land fraud Phiph Deimeas to repay \$33.5 million to 1,115 families. But three years on from the owner's initial arrest, the indebted families remain wary as their struggles deepen.

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Nguon Sothy, 53, and his wife, Yeung Sophea, 51, moved to live in a shack on their daughter's land in Prey Veng province after losing money to Piphup Deimeas. (Phoung Vantha/Mekong Independent)

By Phoung Vantha

Nguon Sothy's family is among thousands caught in a massive land fraud scheme orchestrated by Piphup Deimeas Investment, which enticed rural land buyers with promises of high returns.

To finance their investment, the 53-year-old construction worker took out microfinance loans, leaving his family saddled with overwhelming debt.

"My wife has been sick, but we don't have money for her treatment after she worked hard for a year to repay the loan that we took," he said.

Due to severe financial constraints, his wife has had to resort to traditional medicine to treat her worsening spondylosis — a condition aggravated by a year of manual labor alongside her husband on construction sites.

The couple now lives in a modest hut on their eldest daughter's land. In 2024, escalating monthly loan payments forced them to liquidate all their assets: their house, land, tractor, and livestock.

The family's story reflects a broader crisis, as victims of Piphup Deimeas have fallen into debt and desperation across Cambodia. At least two families have spoken of deaths by suicide.

The company's owner, Hy Kimhong, was arrested

in August 2023 for fraud, but released on bail in November of the same year.

On August 17, three years after his arrest, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court sentenced Hy Kimhong and two associates to 15 years in prison each for fraud. The court also ordered the tycoon to repay \$33.5 million to 1,115 victimized families.

But some families remain skeptical about how soon they can receive relief. Hy Kimhong remains free on bail pending appeals, according to a representative of the families.

Promises

Piphup Deimeas Investment Co., Ltd. was registered with the Ministry of Commerce in 2018 by Hy Kimhong, a former “oknha” whose title was revoked by royal decree in April 2024. Oknha titles are given to businesspeople who donate at least \$500,000 to the Cambodian state.

Between 2021 and 2023, the company aggressively promoted schemes offering 3% monthly interest on \$16,000 land plots for 24 months, promising buybacks and giving the land titles as collateral to encourage victims to borrow heavily from microfinance institutions.

Nguon Sothy's financial ordeal began in 2023 when he and his wife were targeted by local marketers representing Piphup Deimeas.

"You're old; why keep your land title at home? Invest in it to make money. Your old age can generate income from interest rates," Sothy recalled. A neighbor spent two years encouraging them to join, displaying a new car that Sothy later discovered was merely a company-owned vehicle provided for show.

He bought two plots of land for \$40,000, anticipating a monthly 3% return (\$1,200), according to a receipt dated January 13, 2023. Then his wife added \$5,000 more.

Although taken to a development site, he was never shown the exact boundaries of his plots. To secure the funds, he took out a \$45,600 microfinance loan, splitting it into two accounts and putting one under his eldest daughter's name.

After making the initial investment, Nguon Sothy received \$2,600 in interest over two months. Then, the payments stopped, and the company went silent.

Compensation

Taing Sinhong, a lawyer representing the plaintiffs, said there was a one-month period for either

party to appeal.

If the defendants appealed, she would file a request for the court to expedite the compensation process.

“People face challenges with loans,” she said. They seek expedited legal procedures “because the court has sentenced them.”

Concerns about how long the process will take come not only from the three years the victims have already waited for progress in court, but a history of delays in compensation in other incidents of fraud.

In 2021, the Supreme Court heard that years after a lower court verdict, \$900,000 in compensation had yet to be paid out to Kampong Cham families defrauded by an NGO that had promised high returns on investments.

The Cambodia Happiness Development Organization had presented a document that appeared to be signed by the National Bank governor as it enticed people to sell their land and take out loans, the court heard at the time.

A similar scam by an NGO called WBO also allegedly defrauded about 200 families of \$1 million, with no compensation years later.

It is typical for politicians to get involved in nego-

"Authorities must respect the rule of law as a core value, which makes our society equal under the law."

Sek Socheat, researcher

tiations for compensation, pushing victims to make public appeals and hold protests.

A prime ministerial assistant initially mediated talks over compensation for hundreds of people who lost money in politically-connected investment firm GoldFX in 2022.

In a case similar to Piphup Deimeas, about 300 people protested outside the Justice Ministry in January asking to speed up their trial over alleged fraud in the Brilliant City investment scheme. The scheme's owner, Leng Channa, was arrested in March 2024.

There was still no result, one of the victims told



The victims of piphup deimeas gather outside the Phnom Penh court on August 17, 2026. (Thang Sinorn/Mekong Independent)

Mekong Independent in late August. “It’s still quiet. I’m unsure who else I can ask for help.”

Another alleged land-fraud case, for which real estate tycoon Chea Saron was arrested in 2023, has also yet to lead to compensation, one of the plaintiffs said.

The Brilliant City case reportedly involves \$200 million in funds, while Chea Saron allegedly defrauded thousands of victims of \$40 million.

Sek Socheat, a researcher and commentator on social and political issues, urged the courts to implement the Piphup Deimeas verdict in a timely manner.

In the past, even when victims appeared to receive

justice through a court verdict, enforcement had failed to deliver true justice to the victims, he said.

“Authorities must respect the rule of law as a core value, which makes our society equal under the law,” he said, cautioning that cases involving powerful people can lead to injustices.

Seng Han, 40, has acted as a representative of Piphup Deimeas victims.

He borrowed \$80,000 from ACLEDA Bank in 2021 to invest in the scheme, and has since been forced to sell his gold jewelry and car to pay off part of the debt. He still has an outstanding balance of about \$40,000.

He did not know when the compensation process would begin, as it depended on the court proceedings. If there was no further court action after a month, he would lodge a court petition. Compensation was to be based on the amount families invested in the company, he said.

Hy Kimhong remained on bail pending appeals, Seng Han said, and he urged the court to expedite the process as people were struggling, falling ill and even dying due to debt.

On August 24, a separate group of Piphup Deimeas victims protested outside the court, believ-



Yeung Sophea and Nguon Sothy.

"I told them to jail me."

Nguon Sothy, 53

ing they had a better chance of receiving their money back if company officers were not jailed.

Mekong Independent could not reach the company for comment.

Pressure

Unable to service the debt on income that barely covers daily survival, Nguon Sothy has missed five months of payments. Amret's loan officers visit three to four times a month, remaining indifferent to the family's hardship. He was summoned by the local authority to repay a late loan, as the loan officer had filed a complaint.

"I told them to jail me," he said. He told them he wasn't evading repayment, but they didn't believe him.

He claimed a loan officer had told him that the institution did not care about his failed real estate investment — they simply expected full repayment of the loan. He has to repay both accounts, up to about

\$800 per month in total, while he earns \$350 a month.

“I try to repay the loan under my daughter’s name because I don’t want to cause trouble for her and her family,” he said. “Since I took the loan, I always repay them, never missing it, but lately I’m unable to repay in full; I ask them to pay only the interest rate, and then I ask them to delay.”

Victims have petitioned the National Bank for loan deferments or relief, but to no avail.

Nguon Sothy continues construction work to support his family and pay for his daughter’s university fees.

“I’m worried I won’t be able to repay the loan,” he said, noting that his current site was winding down. “The construction project ends soon, and they plan to cut workers.”

Having spent the past few years campaigning for accountability, Nguon Sothy hoped for swift enforcement of the court ruling.

“My last wish is for the court and authorities to deliver justice for my family and the other victims,” he said. “We just need our money back so we can pay off these loans to at last live a peaceful life.”







Construction workers and abandoned sites in Sihanoukville in July 2026.
(Danielle Keeton-Olsen/Mekong Independent)

WORKERS LEFT LISTLESS AFTER CRACKDOWNS SLOW SIHANOUKVILLE BUSINESSES

By Mech Dara

When 59-year-old Ny lost her job in construction in Sihanoukville's Buon commune early this year in a wave of closures, she scrambled to find another. She succeeded in finding a construction gig near the former Jinbei 4 compound, but only stayed for two weeks.

They never paid her, she said.

"We have to borrow other people's money to buy food to eat," said Ny, using only her given name to speak freely without potential work repercussions. She was among a handful of workers who decided not to leave the coastal boomtown, waiting at a for-

mer construction housing site to find employment.

So Ny started working as a scavenger, looking for cans, metal and electronics anywhere that she could to try to sell.

“Some people are devastatingly desperate, so they turn to theft, breaking into buildings to steal refrigerators,” she added. “We do not blame anybody for this crisis, and it is just part of the cycle of life.”

The sudden freeze of scam operations and supporting businesses this year has left an uncertain future for Cambodian workers in Sihanoukville, particularly in the construction sector, who staked their careers on the city’s once-rapid growth.

Once a hub for scam companies, where anti-trafficking rescuers and journalists found both detained scam workers and IP addresses linked to successful scams, Chinatown is largely emptied, local officials told Mekong Independent. Though there were periods of raids and apparent disbursement of scam companies in the past, this year was a unique shift, observers say.

Heng Bunly, chief of Buon commune’s Village IV, said provincial authorities as well as his local officers searched and sealed several properties during this year’s online scam raids. When he spoke to a reporter

on August 26, he added that they need to search at least 10 more locations within the village.

As a result, a number of construction projects were paused for an unclear amount of time, and workers have been seeking help from local authorities like Heng Bunly, he said.

“When there is no money, they will turn to the village authority for support, but when there is money, they silently work on it,” he said. “Frankly speaking, some buildings have finished, while other buildings have not finished and they have been deserted.”

Now Village VI is more quiet than it was during the Covid-19 pandemic, when there would still be some vendors and restaurants doing business. Rented rooms used to be packed, but now there are no people walking the streets or making businesses because they returned to their hometown, he claimed.

“This is a massive issue,” he said. “Now, there is nothing to say for me and other people [who live here].”

He claimed that he had heard of two protests in the past related construction workers over their payment in the Peninsula Bay and Ou Chheuteal Beach areas within his village.

Kuy Kiri, a council member for Village IV, said

that within his village alone, he accompanied central government authorities over 10 days this past month to seal about 20 locations. He noted that this only accounted for one village throughout Sihanoukville.

But not all villages in Buon commune are as impacted by this year's campaign of raids, one official said.

Sum Sambor, chief of Village I in Buon commune, said authorities came to check a few buildings in his village in the last few months without finding online scams. They also didn't have many buildings that are "frozen" or that stopped construction before their completion.

"We have few spaces like in Village IV and Village VI who have a huge space [for online businesses]," he said.

Buon commune chief Seng Nim said he was aware of buildings being sealed due to scam investigations within his jurisdiction but was not sure of the number.

Workers wait for new constructions

While online scam and gambling workers either fled Sihanoukville or got captured in raids, Cambodian workers who migrated to the coastal city for

"Some people are devastatingly desperate, so they turn to theft, breaking into buildings to steal refrigerators. We do not blame anybody for this crisis, and it is just part of the cycle of life."

So Ny, 59

construction gigs say many feel stuck with no further employment.

In the shadow of the massive scam complex called KB Hotel and Casino or Kaibo, construction workers once established small camps of shack housing, where they could stay as they floated between daily-paying construction jobs in Chinatown. Only about a dozen families remained in their shacks of wooden boards and tarps when a reporter visited the muddy campsite in July.

When Sopheap, 33, first moved there to work, she said she had water, electricity and basic supplies at

the camp. They received stable pay from construction projects, which were crowded with both Cambodian and foreign workers from China or Bangladesh, and the construction workers supported each other when they needed a loan to repay their banks.

The projects suddenly seemed to run out of money in February, not long after a mass exodus of foreign workers from alleged scam companies nationwide.

“All Chinese have left their construction site since February and many big companies have started to stop their operations,” Sopheap explained, giving only her given name to avoid repercussions due to her unstable work conditions. “Chinese staff [of construction sites] had run into problems, so they left before Khmer New Year and some [Cambodian] workers decided to return to their homeland.”

Sopheap said that she was owed around 2 million riels, or about \$500, from a subcontracted boss – so she wasn’t aware which company was responsible for paying the salary she is owed. As a result, she and the other workers are desperate for income, she said.

“Now we have become homeless people,” she said.

When Sopheap and her husband were no longer able to find work, they had to borrow from a private lender to prevent a registered bank from coming after

her. But now the private lender was starting to ask for money back, she said, and she did not know if her boss would ever compensate what she's owed.

"The situation is very difficult and we are unable to cry out," Sopheap said.

Getting their voices out

The construction workers who have not yet left Sihanoukville say they've tried to organize small protests across Sihanoukville to regain their lost salaries, but they've received little indication that their voices were heard.

Am Rom, a former head of a construction team last working in Chinatown, told local media he helped organize a protest of a few dozen workers in front of their construction site on August 24.

He said their goal was to ask for help from Sihanoukville City government and the Labor Ministry after the subcontractor above him failed to pay salaries for about three months. The subcontractor's boss, who got funds directly from an unknown owner of the Chinatown building they were constructing, still owed his team nearly \$20,000 for the lapsed salaries, he said.

"Between 28 and 29 workers keep demanding

"Now we have become homeless people."

Sopheap, 33

their salaries from me, twice or three times, but I do not have the capability to get the money to pay them," he said to local media.

Seng Heang, a 46-year-old resident of the construction worker campsite, said that she tried to protest her loss of livelihood two or three times when reporters had met her in July. But at this point, she turned to scavenging to earn an income.

"The authorities do not pay attention to our concerns, and they have ignored our issues," she said.

Seng Heang said that on a good day she can earn up to 20,000 riels, or about \$5, from collecting cans, but many days she earns only \$1.25.

"We have to save rain water to survive because we do not have money to buy water," she said. Seng Heang also owes \$600 to the bank, and she feels the debt collector coming for her. "I will not return to my homeland because I owe people money. They want to

seize our property.”

Sea changes

Before the crackdown, one security guard who did not want to give his name said he witnessed people spending unbelievable amounts of money up until early this year.

Some of the Chinese online scam workers in his building, in Sihanoukville’s Buon commune, would request his help to park, and they would hand him several dollars each time, or hand him a cold beer. He could earn between 300,000 to 400,000 riels per day in tips – between \$75 and \$100, almost unheard of for Cambodian parking guards. He knew the workers themselves earned at least \$1,000 per month, but many were making much more than that, he said.

“Before, they spent their money like it was paper,” he said. “Now I can earn only 10,000 riels per day,” he said, or about \$2.5.

Even the vendors in Sihanoukville’s seaside tourism industry said they came to rely on the big-spending habits from the scam industry. Thy, a vendor who sells grilled seafood from a small beachside stall, sells a bundle of grilled squid on skewers for 10,000 riels, or \$2.5 each. With the plethora of Chi-

nese, Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian workers passing through before the crackdown, he could sell between \$75 and \$100 of seafood and grilled vegetables daily. Now he's lucky to earn \$25 a day, he said.

Thy attributed his lack of luck to the sudden closure of scam compounds, as workers emptied out and thus stopped coming to his stall for meals and snacks.

He could list off all the buildings he saw close down from Buon commune within this year: KB Casino, Jinshui, the X-shaped building and twin buildings nearby, as well as the White Sand Casino. Others from further out, like the Jinbei casinos linked to the defunct Prince Group, were also emptied and left unguarded.

"When these places were shut down, how can people like me earn our incomes!" he said. "Some people have returned to their homeland because they cannot find any work to do here anymore."

Additional reporting by Danielle Keeton-Olsen





A timber truck transporting wood from a forest in Southeast Asia. (Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay)

SATELLITES CAPTURE ONGOING TREE LOSS IN CARBON-CREDIT ZONES

By Thang Sinorn

Nearly two decades after Cambodia began adopting carbon-credit programs for protected forests, satellite data suggest that tree cover continues to disappear inside many of the country's flagship conservation landscapes.

Under the U.N.-backed REDD+ framework, countries receive money to protect forests for absorbing carbon dioxide and preventing emissions from deforestation.

However, satellite data between 2010 and 2025 suggest that tree cover continues to decline inside several REDD+ landscapes.

Across six REDD+ projects analyzed, five show tree-cover loss continuing at rates near or higher than

before the conservation projects started. Open Development Cambodia compiled the data based on REDD+ boundaries and Global Nature Watch satellite data.

These projects can receive money for reducing carbon emissions even if there is deforestation. This is based on a system of “baseline scenarios,” where the REDD+ projects say there would be even fewer trees if not for their work. Several projects showed improvements in recent years.

A critic of the program, however, says Indigenous communities should instead lead forest conservation, based on practices that protected the areas for generations.

Tree-cover loss

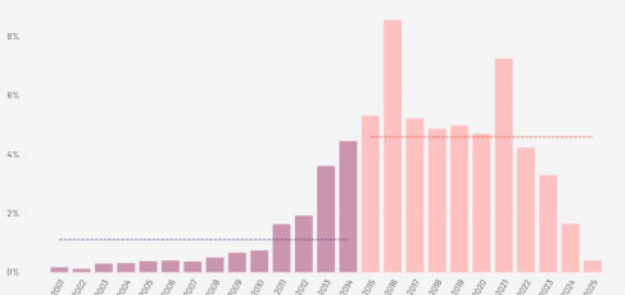
The Tumring project in Kampong Thom showed the most tree-cover loss in the ODC data: After launching at the end of 2014, its tree-cover loss adds up to about half its total area, according to the satellite data. The rate of loss has decreased in the last five years.

Despite reports about deforestation, the project has denied large-scale logging and claimed hundreds of thousands of tons in net carbon-dioxide reductions.

Tumring REDD+

Annual tree-cover loss

Before and after the REDD+ project was launched in 2015

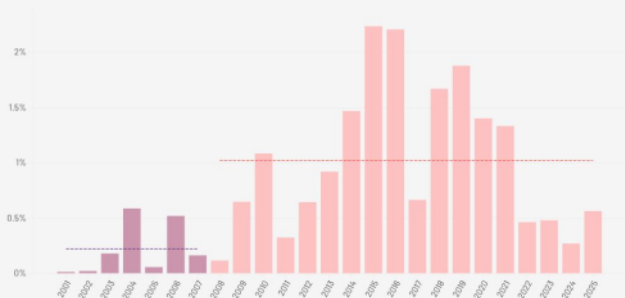


Source: Global Nature Watch, compiled for the REDD+ project area by Open Development Cambodia

Oddar Meanchey REDD+

Annual tree-cover loss

Before and after the REDD+ project was launched in 2008. Its certification expired in 2018 amid controversy



Source: Global Nature Watch, compiled for the REDD+ project area by Open Development Cambodia

Mekong Independent has reached out to the project for comment.

The Oddar Meanchey REDD + project has also consistently lost more forest cover each year since its launch in 2008 compared to the period before, the satellite data suggest. Its certification expired in 2018. The project has fared better in the past four years compared to the decade before.

A major customer, Virgin Atlantic, stopped buying carbon credits from it in 2018 as critics called the credits “bogus”: “They are based on emissions savings that never happened, because the forest was destroyed not protected.”

Mining in protected areas

The Lumphat Wildlife Sanctuary REDD + launched in 2019. Since, it has lost tree cover at a low rate similar on average compared to the period before.

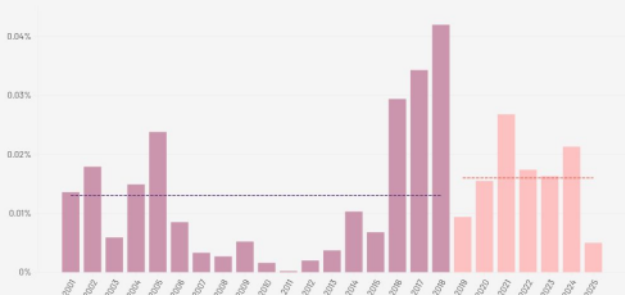
The Keo Seima REDD + project, meanwhile, launched in 2010 and has mostly kept tree-cover loss below pre-project levels. Over 15 years it has lost less than 0.5% of the total project area in tree cover loss, according to the satellite data.

Nevertheless, surrounding protected forests have been under pressure. Since 2020, at least five mining companies have been granted hundreds of hectares in

Lumphat REDD+

Annual tree-cover loss

Before and after the REDD+ project was started in 2019 and implemented in 2023

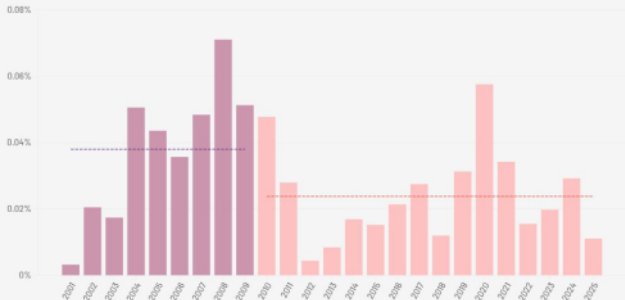


Source: Global Nature Watch, compiled for the REDD+ project area by Open Development Cambodia

Keo Seima REDD+

Annual tree-cover loss

Before and after the REDD+ project started in 2010



Source: Global Nature Watch, compiled for the REDD+ project area by Open Development Cambodia

concessions in community-protected areas adjoining the Lumphat Wildlife Sanctuary. In 2023, the govern-

ment approved a 4,000-hectare mining concession leading to warnings of “significant” destruction in the wider Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary’s “core” zone.

Hydropower

The Southern Cardamom REDD+ project was launched in 2016 with at least four Chinese-owned hydropower projects already built inside its boundaries. Then in 2024, the Cambodian government approved construction of a new 100-MW Stung Veal Thmor Kambot dam in the middle of the REDD+ project.

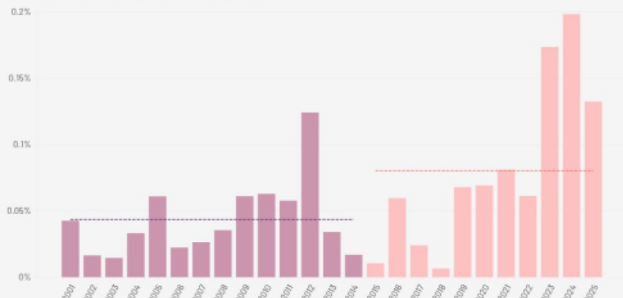
The neighboring Phnom Samkos REDD+ is in a similar situation: The year after its 2022 launch, the government approved the construction of the 150-MW Stung Meteuk series of dams. However, notorious tycoon Ly Yong Phat’s hydropower project was then temporarily suspended in 2024 over alleged environmental violations.

Recent satellite data suggest a small uptick in tree-cover loss in the Southern Cardamoms REDD+ project over the past three years, reaching its highest levels over the 25-year data period. It appears to have lost about 0.2% of the total project area in tree cover in 2024. Phnom Samkos has seen above-average but

Southern Cardamom REDD+

Annual tree-cover loss

Before and after the REDD+ project was launched in 2015

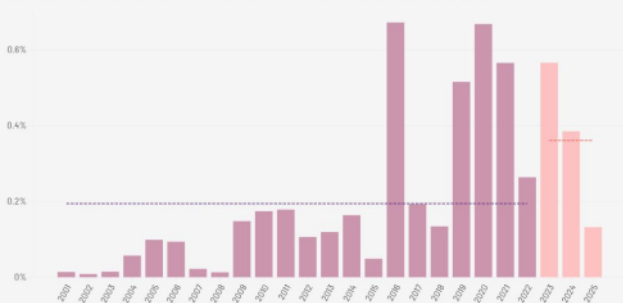


Source: Global Nature Watch, compiled for the REDD+ project area by Open Development Cambodia

Phnom Samkos REDD+

Annual tree-cover loss

Before and after the REDD+ project was launched in 2023. It has not yet been verified to sell carbon credits



Source: Global Nature Watch, compiled for the REDD+ project area by Open Development Cambodia

declining tree-cover loss for the same three years.

Satellite estimates

Wildlife Alliance, which manages the two projects working around the government-approved hydropower developments, said it monitored tree loss by combining satellite and drone imagery with on-the-ground patrols.

Global Nature Watch's satellite data was useful to investigate forest cover at a national or jurisdictional level, but "must be used with extreme caution more locally (i.e. to analyse individual projects)," it said.

The data was not fine-tuned for different environments, and "we hope and expect this uncertainty will be reflected in any article you publish."

Any forest loss and emissions impact from dam constructions will be assessed, and the number of carbon credits issued adjusted accordingly, it said.

Global Nature Watch also notes that it defines tree-cover loss as both temporary and permanent "removal of tree cover for any reason," and is not necessarily human-caused or permanent deforestation.

A 2022 study by Everland, a company that provides strategic communications and marketing for REDD+ projects, says REDD+ projects that are losing forests are still faring better than nearby areas. The analysis, published in Nature subsidiary Scien-

“These companies are buying rights that allow them to continue polluting with impunity, without changing their predatory practices. To continue business as usual.”

Frédéric Bourdier, University Paris-Sorbonne

tific Reports, used Global Nature Watch data to estimate tree-cover loss in several protected areas.

The ‘baseline’

REDD+ projects calculate emissions reductions by comparing them to a business-as-usual scenario. This baseline estimates how much forest loss and greenhouse gas emissions would have occurred without the project.

This baseline is audited, but controversies remain. The Guardian reported in 2023 that globally, “more than 90% of rainforest carbon offsets by biggest certifier are worthless.” REDD+ claims did not represent “genuine carbon reductions,” and threats to forests were overstated, it said. The certifier, Verra, disputed

the report as “absolutely incorrect.”

Frédéric Bourdier, a researcher with the University Paris-Sorbonne, said baseline calculations required reliably forecasting the future, and large assessment errors had been found.

The difficulty of measuring carbon stored in forests was compounded by “the dark and messy art” of peering into the future and the fact that projects produce their own baseline estimates, which are then assessed by Verra-approved third-parties.

“REDD+ programs provide, above all, a right to pollute,” he said. “These companies are buying rights that allow them to continue polluting with impunity, without changing their predatory practices. To continue business as usual.”

Verra has not responded to a request for comment.

Cambodia has 12 REDD+ projects, seven of which have been registered with Verra, according to a 2025 study. Not all projects have been fully verified or have issued carbon credits. Wildlife Alliance noted that its Phnom Samkos project had yet to undergo validation or verification. The Environment Ministry’s REDD+ Cambodia website has an incomplete listing of projects, while Verra’s database appears to list eight relevant projects.

The six projects analyzed by ODC were those with boundary information available from the Verra registry in KML format. ODC then used these publicly available project boundaries to estimate annual tree-cover loss data from Global Nature Watch's map catalog for the years 2010-2025.

Beyond REDD+

Cambodia's REDD + projects are not alone in facing reports of deforestation.

Ma Chettra, an environmental activist, regularly patrols the Prey Preah Roka and Prey Lang wildlife sanctuaries in Preah Vihear province. During his patrols, he said he frequently encounters illegal logging and forest encroachment.

He said he could not determine whether deforestation had increased or decreased overall, but forest crimes appeared to occur almost every day.

"There is not a patrol where we don't see logging or hear the sound of chainsaws in the forest," he said.

On July 28, Chettra and representatives of the Prey Lang Community Network were invited by the Ministry of Environment to provide evidence and respond to questions regarding a viral video he posted alleging illegal logging inside the Prey Lang Wildlife

Sanctuary.

Khvay Atitya, spokesperson for the Ministry of Environment, denied the findings around forest loss in REDD+ projects, saying “I don’t have this information.”

Before a project can be implemented and carbon credits sold, it must meet a set of criteria to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, protect ecosystems and improve the livelihoods of local communities, he said.

“We have a Safeguard Information System (SIS), including the principle of obtaining Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from local communities and Indigenous peoples.”

Khvay Atitya added that projects must also include a grievance mechanism to address impacts or land disputes arising from the project and clearly define how revenue from carbon credit sales is distributed back to communities.

Wildlife Alliance said its projects had provided clean water, health care and education to local communities, including \$3 million invested in the Southern Cardamoms area. Local people overwhelmingly support the project, it said. However, Human Rights Watch has questioned its consent process, accusing

the project of violating Indigenous communities' rights.

Indigenous alternative

Frédéric Bourdier, the University Paris-Sorbonne researcher, argued that carbon trading was not the answer. "Not at all. Neither here nor elsewhere."

"One interesting alternative would be to listen and receive inspiration from Indigenous peoples" who had long managed their territories in relative harmony with nature, he said.

He pointed to effective examples in India, South America and Canada where governments had allowed local communities to manage their own territories with limited state intervention.

But such approaches were rarely embraced by policymakers or conservation organizations. "At least in Cambodia, probably because civil society movements are not easy to emerge," he said.

As the climate crisis deepened, the only real worldwide alternative was to drastically change our collective ways of life, he said.



