

# Rising work-related deaths and diseases in Vietnam

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Vietnam's emergence as a cheap labour platform for transnational corporations, as well as a major exporter of coal and rice, has been accompanied by a high toll of death and injury among workers and peasants. According to the labour ministry estimates, there were 120,000-130,000 workplace accidents from 2005 to 2010, killing around 12,000 people. In other words, some 2,500 people, including innocent pedestrians passing construction sites, are killed every year.

A report by state-run Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) recorded in December that 287 workers nationwide were killed in a total of 254 workplace accidents in the first 10 months of 2010. Compared to the 2009 figure of 550 deaths recorded from 6,250 accidents, last year's toll seems to have dropped.

According to "Labour and Social Trends in Vietnam 2009/10," a joint report of Vietnam's labour ministry and the International Labor Organisation (ILO) published in June, the numbers of injuries increased sharply from about 4,164 injured in 4,050 accidents during 2005 to 6,421 injured in 6,250 accidents during 2009.

Last July, Pham Gia Luong, deputy head of the labour ministry's workplace safety agency, admitted the "real number of work place accidents in Vietnam is assumed to be far higher than statistics show". Only 3 percent of Vietnam's 400,000 enterprises, which employ 8.6 million workers, report accidents to his agency. The rest of the country's 46-million workforce is employed in agricultural cooperatives or handicraft villages where accident statistics simply do not exist. Pham stated that the country "cannot control occupational safety, so the number of workplace accidents tends to increase and is becoming complicated".

The reason behind the large number of deaths and injuries is the Vietnamese Communist Party's embrace of the freewheeling capitalist exploitation of workers and the rural poor by foreign and local investors. The latest

European Chamber of Commerce report ranks Vietnam's labour costs as the second lowest in Asia at \$49 a month, just behind impoverished Cambodia. Attracted by cheap labour costs, foreign investment has been flooding into the country.

The number of newly-registered enterprises in 2009 increased 29.4 percent from 2008. Almost all were private and foreign-owned. State-owned firms now account for just 2 percent of the total number of companies. Despite the proliferation of enterprises, Vietnam had only 496 labour inspectors in Vietnam in 2008.

According to the VGCL's understated figures, the industrial and mining sectors recorded the highest number of deaths, with 19 deaths in each sector during the first 10 months of 2010. The largest industrial centre, Ho Chi Minh City, recorded the most deaths—with 56 deaths in 52 incidents. As to the specific causes of these deaths, the VGCL identified falls from heights, which accounted for 21 percent, followed by being hit with falling objects and equipment, slips and falls, burns and electric shocks.

In the construction industry, private companies that have won bids for projects often transfer work to a number of contractors. Many use low-quality equipment and unskilled labour to reduce costs. The country's penal code, however, only punishes individuals for accidents, not business organisations or companies.

Dangerous working conditions are not limited to the industrial sector. Work accidents and work-related diseases are becoming more serious in the farming sector, which accounts for nearly 50 percent of the workforce (predominantly small farmers and a growing number of workers employed by agribusiness). In recent years, Vietnam has emerged as one of the world's largest rice exporters, and the export value of agricultural products increased by nearly 400 percent, to \$9 billion, from 2000 to 2009.

Last October, the *Viet News* newspaper cited a survey about occupational accidents in rural areas by the National Institute of Labour Protection (NILP). According to the institute, “nearly 66 percent of labourers working in the agriculture sector and craft villages had frequent contact with dust. About 60 percent had regular contact with harmful chemicals”. As a result, rural labourers are suffering from respiratory, skin and gynaecological diseases.

Tran Thi Lai, head of the Hau Giang Province’s agency of population and family planning, told *Viet News* the most common causes of agriculture-related accidents were “use of dangerous agriculture machines and tools, lack of control over agricultural chemicals and difficult conditions for work-related health care services”.

An Asian Development Bank (ADB) report in 2009 stated: “Vietnam has one of the highest chemical input use rates among countries in Asia and the Pacific. Each year an estimated 73 million tons of livestock waste are disposed of improperly into ponds, channels, and sewers, or left in fields, eventually polluting the surrounding areas. Wastewater samples taken from livestock farms indicated that about 90 percent do not meet the applicable industrial wastewater discharge standards, especially with regard to biological oxygen demand and chemical oxygen demand levels.”

Unsafe and brutal sweatshop conditions, in addition to rising prices, have driven the expanding working class, many of them rural migrant workers, into struggle. The number of reported strikes has increased tenfold over past decade, from 70 in 2000 to 720 in 2008. The latest was reported in December when more than 23,000 workers at two South Korean-owned garment factories walked out over low pay and lack of holidays.



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