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**Land-grabs in Vietnam  
Losing the plot**

**Anger rises over corrupt local officials**  
Mar 16th 2013 | HANOI [From the print edition](#)



REUTERS

Get off my land

THICK envelopes mailed from villages in 57 of Vietnam’s 63 provinces are piling up in Le Hien Duc’s living room. The subject of the correspondence is land. “The government is seizing it,” says Ms Duc, an 80-year-old activist and retired primary-school teacher. “They say it’s all about investing in social-welfare projects, but I call it stealing.” Vietnam’s Communist Party came to power wooing peasants on promises of sweeping land reforms. Three-quarters of the country’s 90m people still live in the crowded countryside. Though the state still formally owns all the land, in 1993 it gave many farmers 20-year usage rights on farmland. That represented a ground-breaking move following an earlier and disastrous period of state-led agricultural collectivisation.

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Yet in these days of rapacious capitalism, many local officials seize farmland for development projects, compensating villagers at rates far below market value. The party’s pro-peasant rhetoric has come to sound hollow. Land grievances dominate complaints sent up to the central government. Followers of China’s development will recognise the story. Property values have slumped, in tandem with slow-burning economic and banking crises. Yet conflicts over land still fester. Tension is especially acute on the peripheries of the capital, Hanoi, and other big cities. There, the disparity between property values and compensation rates is often widest. Some villagers protest outside government offices. Others, driven to desperation, defend their turf with rocks or homemade weapons. In one example, fish farmers in Haiphong, a port city east of Hanoi, disrupted a planned eviction by battling police with shotguns and

homemade landmines. State-controlled media covered the incident extensively, and the prime minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, publicly chided local officials. Many Vietnamese view the farmers, who stand accused of attempted murder, as heroes.

Beginning in May the National Assembly must decide what to do when the 20-year usage rights start to expire. The betting is that rights will be extended for 50 years. Aid donors, meanwhile, are urging the government to narrow the scope of what sorts of property it may legally seize for development.

Claiming land for infrastructure projects is often justifiable, and Vietnam badly needs better ports and roads. But regulations permit local officials to seize land for vaguely defined economic development. Small wonder that ordinary Vietnamese, according to a survey led by the World Bank, view land administration as their country's second-most corrupt bit of public life, just behind traffic police. Older farmers in northern Vietnam complain that the land they defended against French and American armies was first wasted through failed Communist experiments and is now being lost to condominiums.

Police in Hanoi grudgingly allow elderly villagers to protest outside the presidential palace. But gatherings on the dusty outskirts of the capital are more likely to turn violent, spurring chatter and criticism of the government online. In Duong Noi, on Hanoi's south-western edge, villagers scuffled with police in late January to prevent bulldozers from clearing land where their ancestors are buried. Some of them have turned up at the Hanoi office of a state-run newspaper to plead for coverage, or sent grievances to Le Hien Duc, the anti-corruption activist. One villager, Tran Van Sang, says he refuses to accept a meagre \$9,000 for his 720 square-metre (7,750 square-foot) plot of land. "Land is our source of life," he says. "We'll die to defend it."

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