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Viet Nam: Sentence reduced for cyber dissident at appeal

Today, prisoner of conscience, Dr Pham Hong Son, had his 13 year prison sentence for espionage reduced to five years in detention and three years house arrest at an appeal hearing in Hanoi.

"While we welcome the unprecedented move to reduce his prison term, we are dismayed that Dr Pham Hong Son remains in prison for the peaceful expression of his political beliefs," Amnesty International said. The organization has been calling for his immediate and unconditional release since his arrest in March 2002 and issued a report on his case after his trial in June 2003.

Dr Pham Hong Son was charged with espionage after translating an article "What is Democracy?" from the website of the United States embassy in Viet Nam, and sending it over the Internet to both friends and senior party officials. He also wrote an article "Hopeful signs for Democracy in Viet Nam" which was again transmitted to senior party officials. In none of his activities did Dr Pham Hong Son advocate violence in his opposition to the Vietnamese Government and their policies.

"His trial lasted little over two hours and the appeal was held, like the trial, behind closed doors with limited access to family and no press or diplomatic representatives present. There has been no information provided as to why his original sentence has been so drastically reduced," said Amnesty International.

"How many Pham Hong Son's are languishing in Viet Nam's prisons?," asked Amnesty International. "We are concerned about the faceless individuals who do not benefit from the same international attention and outcry given to this case," continued the organization.

Dr Pham Hong Son's case is one of several recent instances of dissidents being arrested and subjected to cursory trials lasting a few hours behind closed doors and resulting in lengthy prison sentences. In many of these cases, the dissidents concerned have propagated their ideas and other information through the Internet.

"The rights to freedom of expression and access to information and Viet Nam's obligations to uphold these rights apply equally in cyberspace as anywhere else. We believe that a greater degree of openness and a willingness to accept constructive criticism would help guarantee basic rights which Viet Nam has committed to," added the organization.

For more information, please go to:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa410162003>

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